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BOUND TOGETHER.

TALES.

BY

HUGH CONWAY,

(F. J. FARGUS,)

AUTHOR OF 'CALLED BACK.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

London :

R E M I N G T O N A N D C O . ,

HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

1884.

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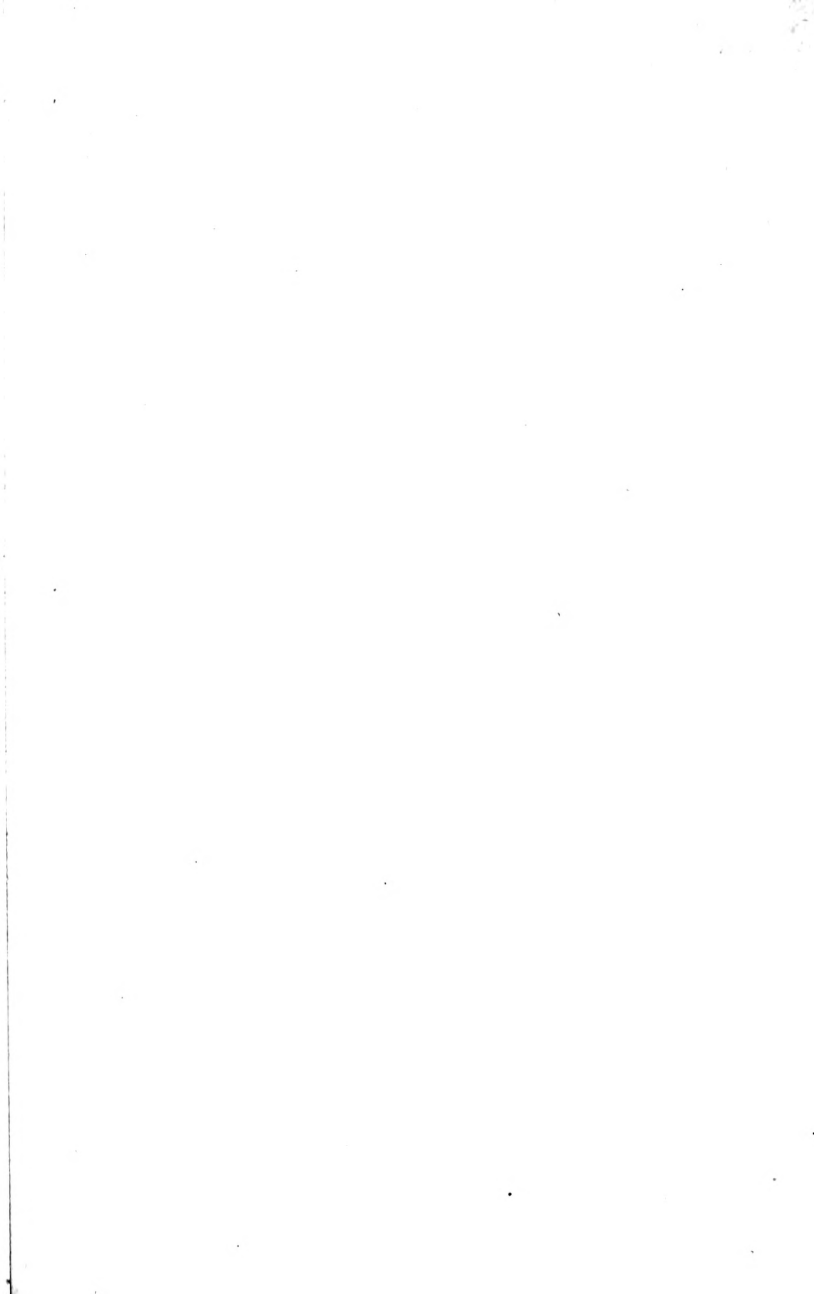
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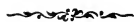
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BOUND TOGETHER.



OUR LAST WALK.

(A MYSTERY.)

IF I wished to tell a love-tale, I should begin this with the sweetest memories of my life, and relate when and where Walter Linton and I first met; should describe my pride and happiness when I knew that he wished me to become his wife. The love we bore each other through life—aye, even after life—may be made manifest as I write these lines, but it is not because I loved him I have this tale to tell. Other women have loved as I love, and have mourned as I mourn: my life, so far as the joy and grief of it go, is but the life of thousands.

Had Walter Linton, when first he asked

me for the heart which was already his own, been but a poor struggling man, I should have given him all as freely as I did then. If need had been, I could have waited patiently for years, or until fortune smiled upon him. Feeling this, I had no false sentiment as to sharing the worldly good that was his, although I was a penniless girl and brought nothing in my hands. Of course, kind friends around wondered why Walter did not choose a wife who would bring him wealth as well as love. Ah, no one could have given him more love than I could give him : that was all he wanted or asked for. He was twenty-three, and his own master ; I was twenty, and utterly alone in the world. So we were married—just six weeks after that happy spring-day on which he told me I was dearest to him.

Our home—a dear, grey old house, full of pleasant corners—was Draycot Hall, Somersetshire, not far from the Mendip Hills. Walter had recently inherited the house and the estate of Draycot, and when we took possession of our kingdom, which was almost as new to Walter as it was to me, life seemed

to hold all that could be desired. Walter's income was sufficient for the life of a quiet country gentleman—a life to which he settled down, and appeared to find every wish gratified in that happy existence. Shooting, fishing, and hunting gave him plenty of amusement, and the land, part of which he farmed himself, brought occupation and interest enough to make him feel that his life was not altogether an idle or useless one.

Then, to make our happiness complete, the children came—a girl, then one, two, three bonny boys. How merry and busy the old house grew with them, the sturdy rogues! How proud Walter was of them!

We were not very rich people. Compared to that of some of our county neighbours, our income was insignificant. Draycot Hall, although not such an imposing pile as the name might suggest, was by no means a small house; and, like all rambling old places, cost a good deal of money to keep up. Even when we began life together we found, at the end of the year, that our expenditure and income nearly tallied, and as expenses increased with an increasing family, we felt that

a few hundreds added to our revenue would be a very welcome addition. But in spite of this our lot was too happy for us to think of grumbling.

We sat one summer's evening on the lawn. The air was cooled by late fallen rain, and sweet with fragrance rising from the freshened flowers—for days were long and petals not yet closed. Our latest given child slept on my knee ; and, as we watched the sun sink slowly down behind the Mendip Hills, my husband said :

‘ Helena, how shall we manage to start all these boys in life ?’

I laughed at such a distant obligation. We were still young, and it seemed that so many years must pass before the baby on my knee would want a starting hand. I kissed the child's little white fingers.

‘ Why, Walter,’ I said, ‘ you are looking a long, long way into the future.’

‘ Yes, my girl ; but days happy as ours pass very quickly. It will not seem so long before we shall be obliged to think about it. What shall we do then ? We save no money even now, you know. By-and-by we must

send these babies to school ; after that they will want money to help them on in professions. How are we to do all this ? Our income won't increase.'

'We must try and economize,' I answered, impressed by the really serious view he took.

'But how ? As it is, we can scarcely make both ends meet. I am afraid I am selfish in living as I do. I have serious thoughts of going into some business and trying to make a fortune.'

I begged, beseeched him to dismiss the wild idea. Were we not happy enough with all we now possessed ? Why change our mode of life, which was so peaceful and sweet ? Besides, in my heart of hearts I doubted if my good, easy-going Walter was quite fitted for a commercial career. He kissed me as I pleaded eloquently for a continuation of our present happiness, and for a time the subject dropped.

Yet I could see, from remarks he now and again made, that the thought lingered in his mind, and I began to fear lest, some day, he might put it into practical shape, when the

anxieties attendant on money-making or money-losing might be ours.

It was some months after our conversation that old Reuben Dyke, a well-known character in the village of Draycot, came to the Hall. He wanted to see the master on important business, he said. This old Reuben was the greatest gossip of the place—the ale-house oracle—meddler in everyone's business, and unsolicited adviser-in-general to the little world around him. He was a great authority among the villagers, many of whom would have backed his opinion against the united wisdom of a Daniel and a Solomon. His talk and broad Somerset accent always amused us, and, it may be, ensured him a better reception than his virtues merited.

To-day he entered the room with an indescribable look of mystery and secrecy on his shrewd old face. He carefully closed the door after him and bade us a respectful good-day. Then, drawing quite close to us, he spoke in guarded whispers.

'I be jest come, zur, to tell 'ee as ther' have a-bin a chap a staayin' at the Blue Boar

vor the last two or dree daäys. Mebby, zur, as you've a zeed un about—a darkish, picket-noased zort of a chap.'

'Yes, I saw him,' answered Walter. 'What about him?'

'Now, look here, zur. None o' we couldn't at vust miake out what a wer' up to. He yent one o' them outrides, you zee. He werdn't lookin' aäter shopkippers. He were a ferrettin' about aäter land. Zo we up and ax'd un what farm a wer' aäter, or if a did want to buy any land hereabouts? He laughed and zed, zes he, "We be gwain to make a raäilroad right up droo theese yer valley." Zes I, "I hoap my head won't yache till we do get a raäilwaäy on Mendip, vor that is a devilish poor country." "True," zes he; "but there be a lot o' coal jest under—along Havyat Green and Upper Langford." Zes I, "Zo I've a-heerd;" and *then* I zeed in a minute which waay the cat wer' jumpin'. He werdn't gwain to make nar a raäilwaäy; he wanted to zenk a coalpit, and get howld o' zome land under false pertences. Zo, if I wer' you, zur, and if I wer' Mr. Llewellyn, I should jest keep my eyes open;

vor I shouldn't wonder if, one o' thease here daäys, he won't be along and offer 'ee a hundred and fifty a yacre vor zome o' your poorest land. But my advice to you, zur, is—doan't 'ee zell it—not vor double the money.'

After this important communication, Reuben bowed himself out ; retiring probably to the kitchen, in order that he might regale himself with meat and drink and our servants with the latest village gossip. Walter and I sat digesting his news.

'I wonder if there can be any truth in it,' said Walter. 'I'll go down to-morrow and see that fellow at the inn, and ask him point-blank about it.'

But on the morrow the fellow at the inn was there no longer. He had departed and left no address. The landlord only knew him as plain Mr. Smith. We never saw or heard of him again—whatever his errand may have been, it was not revealed to us ; but, nevertheless, old Reuben's conjecture as to the object of his sojourn at the Blue Boar quite unsettled Walter's mind. The thought that untold wealth might be lying

under our very feet was always present to it, and at last he resolved to employ experts who were competent to give an opinion on the matter, and settle our hopes and doubts.

So, very soon, we were visited by Captain Thomas Davies of Aberfellteg, and Captain Davies Thomas of Cwmtwgwyn, two gentlemen whose strangely accented English, redundant with such words as 'Inteet' and 'Inteet to coodness,' was a source of great amusement and enjoyment to each of us. They inspected, diagnosed, experimented, and then reported. My poor dear love! shall I ever forget your excitement, your joy, as we perused together that glowing joint production? What wealth you dreamed of and counted up! Not, I know, that you wished for riches for your own sake—it was for the sake of wife and children that the desire of acquiring a large fortune obtained such a hold on you. Ah me! how certain, how clear and straightforward it all seemed! Had not the mining captains calculated, with an accuracy that seemed infallible, every ton of coal that lay hidden beneath our green fields? Did not their

figures prove beyond dispute the profit each ton raised must bring? After every contingency had been guarded against, what read like Aladdin's wealth lay waiting for us to stoop down, take, and enjoy. Why should we not do so?

Then other gentlemen came to our quiet home—legal gentlemen—gentlemen who were called financiers—gentlemen learned, very learned, it seemed to me, in acreages, crops, and soils. Old safes were unlocked, old plans and musty deeds extracted from their recesses. I heard the word 'Mortgage' frequently; and Walter told me he had resolved to share his promised wealth with no one. He would work the projected mines solely on his own account; but, in order to begin operations, money was needful: so he had arranged with the two financial gentlemen, Messrs. Leach and Vincent, of Bristol, that such sums of money as were necessary should be advanced to him upon the security of his estate. And these gentlemen applauded Walter's courageous resolution, and everything went so pleasantly.

Then the digging began!

Oh, how I hated it ! From the very first I hated it ! Not only did it spoil one of our prettiest fields—the one where the children gathered earliest cowslips—but it brought strange faces and rough forms to the quiet, sleepy little village. Men and women of a very different type to that of labourers round about. Slatternly untidy women and strong surly men who knew not the traditions of the land. Men who were supposed to beat their wives once a week, and who, we knew, played havoc with our neighbours' costly preserves. Men who worked hard—very hard—and insisted upon that work being highly paid for—who spent so large a proportion of those hard-earned wages in drink, that the landlords of the opposition village inns actually shook hands in their unexpected prosperity ; whilst our kind, old, easy-going Rector fairly cried at the way in which his new and unwelcome parishioners were demoralizing the old ones, and old Reuben Dyke seemed to look almost patronizingly upon us, as two deserving young people helped to fortune by his great sagacity and wisdom.

So it went on, month after month ; yet I saw no signs of the advent of that promised wealth. So far as I could understand it, the seam of coal hit upon by those clever captains was a failure. It broke, or dipped, or something else ; so the continuation had to be sought elsewhere. Thereupon Captains Thomas Davies and Davies Thomas came over again, inspected again, and reported so cheerfully that Walter's face lost that look of anxiety which I had lately seen upon it, and he pushed on the work more briskly than before.

Then they told me the right seam had been found—Walter was radiant. Out of the first money gained he would send Thomas Davies and Davies Thomas a hundred pounds apiece, as an extra recognition due to their skill and good counsel. Larger sums than before were furnished by our financial friends, who came to the Hall once or twice, and were, I thought, very rude and familiar in their manner. Machinery and engines were erected, more men engaged, and in time, great black heaps began to accumulate, and grimy black faces met me

at every turn. Our peaceful and beautiful home was so changed that I began almost to loathe what had once been the dearest spot on earth to me, and to long for change of air and scene.

Money seemed always being paid away—large sums that frightened me. But was I not only a woman, who knew nothing of business?

Yet all these grievances were nothing to the grief I felt at seeing the change in my darling's face. Every week I noticed an alteration. Gradually, a cloud of care seemed settling down on his once gay nature, and I knew his mind was anxious and ill at ease. He grew thinner: his dark hair showed signs of premature greyness: his sleep was often restless and unrefreshing. Though now, as he ever had been, kind and gentle to me, at times with others he was moody, silent, and evidently worried. All the brightness of youth appeared to be leaving him, so much so, that my heart ached to see him, and I felt I could bear it no longer. I would learn the worst he had to tell me, claiming my right

as a true wife to share trouble as well as joy with my husband.

The confidence I was resolved to claim came unasked for. One evening Walter returned home and threw himself into a chair, apparently utterly broken down. He covered his eyes with his hands and sobbed bitterly.

I knelt at his side and my arms were round him. Then he told me all—I need not give the details. The bare truth was this: After all the money spent, the coal raised was of such a poor quality that every ton sold was sold at a loss. And more money than I had ever imagined had been expended. Of course he had been cheated—I knew he was being cheated the moment I saw the faces of the men who had lent him the money he wanted; but there was no help for it, now. Messrs. Leach and Vincent claimed, for advances, costs and interest, the enormous sum of close upon ten thousand pounds. Walter had just come from Bristol, where these men carried on business, and after a stormy interview with them, had been informed that unless the amount was paid by

Saturday, house, lands, and everything would be at once advertised for sale—and to-day was Wednesday!

I knew nothing of law, but, even to my ignorance, this sudden demand and swift procedure seemed unusual.

‘But can they do it?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I am afraid they can. Months ago, when they made me a large advance, they gave me notice to pay the mortgage off. It was a mere matter of form, they said; but now they will act upon it. They are thorough-going rogues, and I believe have some scheme in their heads by which they fancy it possible to get absolute possession of the whole estate.’

‘But, Walter dear, the estate must be worth thousands more than that amount.’

‘Oh yes, I can get the money easily enough. But not in three days. It will cut me to the heart even to see it all advertised, although doubtless the sale may be stopped.’

‘Why not go to that nice old gentleman, Mr. Mainwaring?’ I suggested. ‘You always call him your family solicitor. He will help you, I am sure.’

‘That is just what I intend doing. I shall go to London to-morrow, and show him exactly how I stand, and beg as a great favour that I may have the money at once. When I return I will give orders for all the men to be discharged and the machinery sold. There shall be an end of it before it makes an end of me.’

I was almost hysterical with joy as I heard his last words.

‘Oh, my love!’ I cried. ‘It will all come right with us yet. We are after all only half ruined. We can let the Hall and go abroad for several years. Don’t trouble about it any more. If you could only know how happy I am to think I shall have you back once again, all to myself as of old, you would be happy too. We will live in some quiet French or Swiss town, and be everything to one another again.’

So I talked to him and comforted him, until he grew more composed, and, kissing me, owned that life was still worth having, even if shorn of half its wealth.

That night I slept more happily than I had slept for months.

The morning's post brought a letter from Leach and Vincent. It was couched in legal terms, and stated that unless the amount due was paid *in notes or gold* by Saturday at noon, they would take the threatened steps. Walter at once despatched a telegram, saying the money would be paid, and requesting that the necessary release might be prepared in order to avoid any delay. Then he started for London, in quest of ten thousand pounds.

I had little fear as to the result of his expedition. I can read faces ; and long ago I had read in Mr. Mainwaring's face the kindness of his disposition. I knew he was rich, and that his clients were also rich men ; moreover, he had a high opinion of Walter, and held him in what might almost be termed affection. When he congratulated me upon my marriage, he told me, in unmistakable words, what he thought of my husband. So I was not surprised when, on the Friday evening, Walter returned with a semblance of the old joyous smile on his face ; and, after locking a pocketful of bank-notes in the safe, sat down by me, and for the rest of the

evening built airy castles, or rather cottages, full of peacefulness and love.

When I awoke, next morn, my heart was light ; trouble, it seemed, had been, but passed away so swiftly that its traces scarce remained. I threw the window open, and the fresh sweet air of spring brought gladness on its wings. The honeysuckle, old and great, that clothed the wall beneath my window, just gave signs of breaking into blossom ; leaning out, I plucked some sprays and pinned them in my dress. A thrush sang from a bush below ; my heart kept echoing his notes of love and joy. What cared I for the money, or its loss ? Should I not have my own love back again, and watch his face regain its old bright look of health and happiness ? Passed by his side, and with our children round, would not my life be pleasant in some quaint old town of France ? And we would live so carefully, and save money as years went on, until some day might bring us to the dear old Hall again. Unhappy ?—no ! few moments in my life had happier been than these.

And Walter was cheerful. He would

soon be out of the clutches of his obliging friends. The shock was over. He had told me what had been gnawing at his heart for so long ; he was now looking his troubles fairly in the face, and, as usually happens, found them not so terrible in aspect as he had imagined. He buttoned his bank-notes in his breast-pocket and started for the railway station. He felt better and stronger to-day, and, as the morning was so beautifully fine, was tempted to walk the five miles, instead of driving, as he usually did.

We were early risers, so he had plenty of time, and I thought the walk would do him good. Perhaps it was the feeling of newly restored confidence—perfect and true—which now existed between us that made his farewell to me that morning even more affectionate than it was wont to be—made him insist upon having all the children brought down, and taking many a kiss from those little rosy pursed-up lips—made him pause when he reached the furthest point to which my eyes could follow him, and turning, waft me one more farewell.

I should have walked with him, at any

rate, part of the way ; but household duties had to be attended to ; so, after watching his tall figure disappear at the turning of the drive, I re-entered the house, hoping that the day would pass quickly, and hasten the evening which would bring him back again.

Months and months ago I had promised a friend, who sighed in far away lands for English fields again, to make, this spring, a little collection of dried ferns and send it to her. The anxiety of the last few months had driven the promise from my mind, but as, this morning, I pictured our own projected emigration, my thoughts turned to my distant friend, and my broken promise came back to me. I determined that on the first opportunity I would make amends for my neglect.

Ferns, many of them scarce ones, grew plentifully in our pleasant country ; but on the road that Walter must take on his way to the station they flourished in unusual abundance. I could obtain many varieties close at hand, but some few grew further off ; so I asked Walter, if he should chance to

meet with any specimens of these particular sorts, to pick a frond or two, which he could place between the leaves of the book he carried. I wanted, especially, a specimen of the Northern Shield Fern, which even here is not very common, growing as it does in little patches, sometimes miles apart. He laughed at my idle request, but promised to attend to it.

The day wore on, and the sun got low. It was time to send the dog-cart to meet the train. Long, long before the time had elapsed in which, by any chance, it could return, I was waiting at the window to welcome Walter home again. I waited and waited, until so many weary minutes crawled away that I was fain to conclude he had been detained in Bristol until the next and last train.

I nursed my disappointment, and killed the time as best I could. The hour when I might surely expect him came and passed. The train must be late. I opened the window, and waited and listened for the sound of his coming.

At last I heard the ring of the horse's

hoofs, and saw the approaching dog-cart dimly, by the light of the stars. I ran to the door, eager to greet my husband; but, as the horse drew up on the gravel, I could see only one figure in the dog-cart—that of James, our groom. He told me that his master had come by neither train, so, after waiting, he had driven back alone.

I turned away, very miserable and sad at heart, but, strange to say, felt no fear of evil. Business had, of course, detained him. It seemed unkind not to have let me know in some way, but perhaps he could find no means of doing so. There was not the slightest chance of his returning to-night, the distance being far too great for driving. I must wait until to-morrow.

It was only when I went to bed—alone, for almost the first time since we were married—that fear fell upon me, and fancy brought horrid ideas to my mind—that the possibility of evil having befallen my husband came to me. The large sum of money he carried, the lonely road, the black-faced colliers about the neighbourhood—all combined to fill me with a nameless dread—a

terror which I could scarcely put into thoughts, much less into words. Yet I strove with my fears, trying to strangle each one as it was born.

‘I shall see him to-morrow. To-morrow I shall see him,’ I repeated over and over again ; and as that morning at last dawned, I fell into a restless sleep.

But morning brought him not : noon brought him not—neither letter nor message. So my heart died within me ; and taking a maid with me, I started for Bristol by the afternoon train. It was Sunday : the streets of the large town looked dreary and deserted as we passed through them. Knowing Mr. Leach’s private address, we drove straight to his house. After some delay I was shown into a room.

By-and-by Mr. Leach entered, with his fat forefinger closed in a book of sermons which, I felt instinctively, he had been engaged in reading for the benefit of his young vultures. His smooth face was full of gentle astonishment that anyone should wish to confer with him on business matters on that particular evening in the week. As I looked at him

and read through his mask of hypocrisy, I knew that the man was a rogue and capable of committing any crime. When he saw who his visitor was, his astonished look changed to one of annoyance. He closed his book entirely, laying it on the table with the edifying title turned towards me.

It seems childish to mention such trivial incidents ; but during that terrible time every word, every detail, seems graven upon my memory in deep lines that will never be effaced.

‘ I have called, Mr. Leach——’ I began.

‘ My dear Mrs. Linton, I know why you have called. But I am sorry to be obliged to say that your errand is useless—utterly useless. Mr. Linton made a promise he has not kept. He cannot blame us for the steps we have taken.’

‘ A promise not kept ?’ I echoed.

‘ Certainly not. He undertook to pay us a large sum of money yesterday. He has not been near us—I conclude he is ill,’ he added, with an approach to a sneer.

I sank back in the wildest grief. Then all my fears of the night, all my forebodings

of the day, were true ! I knew that never—never again should I look on Walter's face. He had been murdered—but by whom ?

Mr. Leach endeavoured, after the manner of his kind, to comfort me. He placed his fat hand in a soothing way upon my arm. This action restored my senses to me.

‘ My husband left me only yesterday morning with the money you claim in his pocket. I know it for certain. He was going straight to you. Where is he ? Tell me !’

Mr. Leach gave a start of surprise, but said nothing. I waited for his answer.

‘ Where is he ?’ I reiterated. ‘ Tell me !’

Mr. Leach placed his finger-tips together, and looked at me with an expression almost like placid amusement.

‘ Mrs. Linton,’ he said slowly, ‘ I am a man of business, and have seen strange things in my time, so you mustn't be offended if I ask you a question. Mr. Linton had the money ready for us, you say. In what form was it ?’

‘ In notes, sir,’ I replied. ‘ He told me you declined taking anything else.’

‘ Yes, yes—except gold. So we did. We

are bound to be careful. Now, Mrs. Linton—mind, I mean no offence—do you know that your husband was much embarrassed ?’

‘I know he could pay all just debts—and unjust ones, too,’ I answered, with rising indignation.

‘Yes, of course. All just and unjust debts. All unjust debts—very good. Now, do you think it possible—ten thousand is a lot of money—do you think it possible that Mr. Linton may have—well, in plain English, decamped with it ?’

I heard no more. My face was flaming. I rose and, without another word, left the room. I was in the cab before Mr. Leach had recovered from his surprise, and in another minute was sobbing my poor heart out on the shoulder of my maid—a faithful, good girl who loved me.

I cannot tell you of the next few days. The uncertainty of everything, yet, to me, the utter hopelessness. The dread of what any moment might make known to me. The searchers searching and hoping to find—what ? For I knew that the success of their quest could only bring me the dead body of

my darling—murdered, perhaps, for the sake of the money he carried. Yet hardest of all to bear was the knowledge that the sorrow manifested by those around me was only assumed out of respect to me ; that no one believed Walter to be dead ; that the wicked, cruel slander which had framed itself in Mr. Leach's mind had entered into the minds of others. I could read the thought in the faces of all who came near me during those days. I knew that the paid seekers performed their task with a smile on their lips—that the word went round among them that, in order to be successful, the search should be, not for a dead, but for a living man, to find whom it was needful to look farther away. How was it I did not go mad ?

I cared nothing when some one told me that the property, house, and all were advertised for sale in a few weeks' time. I thought of nothing, saw nothing but the cold, still face of the one I loved. I wished for nothing now but to see his name cleared from the stain thrown upon it—a stain he would have heeded more than death ; this done, I wished to die—that was all. The wild thought

which had at first entered my head, that the men to whom he owed the money had taken it and made away with him, was at last dispelled ; for proof was positive that Walter had not gone to Bristol on that fatal morning. The passengers from the station were too few, and Walter too well-known not to have been noticed. Indeed, no ticket for the class by which he would certainly have travelled had been issued that day. No one had met him that morning, and he had disappeared without leaving a trace ; for people told me that every inch of the country near had been scoured. But I knew they deceived me, and that the wicked thought was in every heart, although no one dared to speak it in words to me, who knew him and loved him.

Mr. Mainwaring, whom I had almost forgotten in my grief, came down in the course of a few days. Unfit as I was for business, I was compelled to see him. The kind old man was in great distress and anxiety, but he was very good to me. He started when he saw that I had already put on mourning.

‘ It is dreadful,’ he said, with tears in his

eyes, and taking both my hands in his. 'Not that I care for the money so much—although, of course, I must make up any deficiency myself, having been guilty of such an irregularity. It is dreadful to think that I, who tried to help Walter, must now strip his wife and children of their last shilling. I trusted him so that I let him have my client's money simply on his note-of-hand, bearing, of course, all responsibility myself. It was most irregular ; but he was so urgent, and I wanted to help him. Poor girl! I will do what I can for you, but I am afraid it can be but little.'

I begged him not to think of us, and thanked him again and again for his great kindness.

'I would, if only in my own interests, pay the money again and stop the sale ; but no one has the power to mortgage the property to me. We do not even know that Walter is dead. It cannot, cannot be true, what everyone seems to hint at?' he added, almost shamefacedly.

I burst into a flood of tears and almost fell at his feet.

‘Not you, Mr. Mainwaring! Not you!’ I sobbed out. ‘You, who knew him, and knew that dishonour was not in him! Let me think that one, at least, believes in my dead love. Would to God, for my sake, it were as people think, so that I might some day see him again.’

The kind old friend raised me.

‘No,’ he said; ‘I don’t believe it. I have known him from a boy, and I knew his father before him. They lie who say Walter Linton could have done such a thing. But it is all very, very dreadful.’

Mr. Mainwaring slept at Draycot Hall that night, but I could not bring myself to spend the evening in his company. We could but think or speak of one subject, and I felt I had no right to inflict my grief upon him. I should be better alone. I watched the children sink to sleep, and for some hours sat by their little white beds listening to their regular breathing. Then I kissed them all gently and very quickly, lest my hot tears, falling on their upturned faces, should awake them; and, near midnight, retired to what with me would wrongly be called rest. I locked the

door of my room, undressed myself, and sat in my dressing-gown over the fire; for the night being damp and cold, my good maid had kindled a fire for me.

And there I sat, not seeking rest. I knew that sleep and I must strangers be for hours: that not until my strength was quite worn out would sad thoughts cease and change to sadder dreams: not till at last from sheer fatigue they fell, would weary eyelids curtain tearful eyes. And so I sat, till slowly died the fire, and morning air stole chilly through the room—thinking of all the joy and sweetness life so lately promised, all it gave me now. It seemed so hard to lose the one I loved—lost, as it were, in darkest night, with none to say where he had wandered.

‘Oh!’ I cried, ‘if I could see you once and say farewell, although your words came but from dying lips! I should not grieve so much, and for the sake of children dear to both might live, and even not go mad.’

The wind had risen with the night, and gusts now and again bore heavy rain that beat against my window; whilst the tall trees round moaned as the gale went tearing

through their boughs. The world seemed full of dismal sounds and grief, and I the saddest in the world. At last sleep conquered sorrow, so I threw myself down on the bed and slept. How long it was I slept I cannot tell, for all the while I seemed awake and seeing fearful sights. Cruel voices whispered words that stabbed my heart, so that in dreams I longed for wakefulness. Then I awoke and heard the wind and rain, louder and fiercer, whilst the room looked strange, as morning dawned in cheerless grey, and crept in through the half turned blind.

I felt dazed. For a moment I could scarcely realize where I was, or quite recall what had happened. I even turned, from force of habit, to see if Walter, who should be by my side, was also awake. Then, as I saw the vacant pillow by mine, all came back to me—came back with such a reflux of sorrow, that, in my despair, I threw out my arms, and sobbing bitterly, called on the one who could not hear me. My right hand lay as it had fallen, outside the coverlid, and, in a minute, I almost shrieked with horror and alarm ; for I felt another hand seek it, touch

it; and I experienced the sensation of fingers closing round my own. Hastily I tore my hand away from that clasp—if what held without restraining, made itself distinctly felt without offering resistance, can be called a clasp—and sprang from the bed. Courageous as I am by nature, I trembled like a leaf, and had it been dark when that unknown hand sought mine, my horror must have vented itself in screams. But the room was nearly light; so in a few moments I conquered that overpowering fright, and looked around for the intruder. I peered into every nook in which one might possibly hide, but detected no one. The door was as firmly locked as I left it. I was alone, for no one could have entered either by door or window. Then I sat down and reasoned with myself on my folly. It was fancy from a mind upset and overwrought with grief. It was the lingering impression left by one of those dreams—those dreadful dreams which sleep had brought me! It was a pure delusion, a creation of my own, and I wondered if, as I feared at times, I was going out of my senses. Although I was able to persuade

myself that this reasoning was correct, I dared not return to my bed, but, sitting once more in my chair, longed for broad daylight.

My thoughts soon wandered away from my recent fright, and took that path which they always followed. My arm dropped to my side, and my fingers relaxed themselves. And then, once more, I felt that hand creep to mine, take it, and hold it. Again I felt the unmistakable sensation of fingers that closed round mine. I felt that there was no hand in mine that my hand could clasp in return, but the sensation of a palm against my palm—fingers twining my fingers—was indisputable. The sensation of pressure was there—faintly, it is true, but it was there. It was no fancy, no dream, this time. Whether mortal or not, a hand, or the semblance of a hand, was holding mine. Again the horror overcame me—again I strove to tear my hand away from this invisible clasp. My blood curdled as I found the result of my efforts failed on this second occasion—found that the fingers which fastened on my own could not be shaken off, do what I would. As I moved my hand, even so the

hand that held it moved with it. If I clenched my own, I could yet feel the strange pressure of those unseen fingers. If I grasped my right hand in my left, there was still the sensation of another hand between my own. Do what I would, move how I would, that clasp, or phantom of a clasp, was ever on my hand. Yet I struggled with fear until the awful thought flashed through my brain that this was the *aura*, the forerunner of paralysis or epilepsy. Then I could bear it no longer. Whether that grasp was the result of bodily or mental ailment, I could bear it no longer—I felt my mind was going. I rushed to the door, tore it open, and my screams rang through the house. Remember, I was but a woman, and alone.

As the sound of hurrying feet drew near, that hand or hand-clasp lying on my own quitted it. Then, as the strange sensation ceased, did I hear a mournful sound, like a sigh, or was it only the wind outside? Did the phantom fingers draw themselves away from mine soothingly, even, it seemed, reluctantly, or was that fancy too? As the servants with frightened looks drew near me,

could that wild and joyful thought that flashed through my brain be more than the thought of a madwoman? What could it mean?

Except for this I was myself again. I had been frightened, I told all who came to me—frightened by dreams, by shadows, by solitude, and my own thoughts. No one wondered at it; what flesh and blood could stand, unmoved, the anxiety I had borne during the last week?

I was overwrought and suffering from sleeplessness, so Mr. Mainwaring insisted upon giving me an opiate. I swallowed it reluctantly, and my maid sat with me, until, in due time, dull sleep told of the potency and efficacy of the drug which I had been made to take.

This artificial sleep lasted without a break until late in the afternoon. Then I awoke refreshed, and in full possession of my senses. I arose and prayed, as I had never prayed before, that my hand might again feel that unseen touch which had nearly driven me mad in the night. 'Will it come again? O, let it come again!' was the constant cry of my heart; and I longed ardently for the

night, which, perhaps, might bring that hand seeking my own again. For, incredible as it seems, I knew, when those fingers last left mine, that love had in part conquered death—that Walter had been with me. Now I feared nothing. Why should I fear? He had loved me living—he loved me now. Whether he came to me in body or in spirit, should he not be welcome? Oh, that he might come again!

And he came again. Mr. Mainwaring, who would not leave Draycot that day on account of the apparently strange state of my health, that evening insisted upon my taking a turn in the garden. I obeyed him, although every plant, every blossom around, seemed breathing sadness. I was too tired to walk for longer than a few minutes, but sat on my favourite seat, and watched the sun sink behind the hills. Even then and there—in broad daylight—I felt his hand seek my own, and my heart leapt with joy. I shunned or strove to avoid it no longer. I let my hand lie still, and again I felt the touch, or the spirit of the touch, of the one I loved. So naturally those fingers closed

round mine ; so familiar seemed that clasp to me, that could I have forgotten the last week, I might have closed my eyes, and, lying there with my hand in his, have thought I had only to open them to happiness once more. If I could but forget !

Even if I had not known in whose hand mine was resting, the caress those fingers gave me would have told me. I wondered why I feared and repulsed them at first. If only I could sometimes sit as I sat then, and know and feel that Walter was beside me, I thought that life might even be happy. So I turned my head towards him, and said, softly—so softly :

‘ Dearest love, you will come often and often, will you not ? You will be always with me ; then I shall not be unhappy.’

He answered not, but I felt a change in the clasp of his hand, and I pondered as to what its meaning could be. Then I fancied that faintly, very faintly, that touch was endeavouring to make me understand something which my grosser earthly faculties failed to grasp—to direct, to lead me some-

where for some purpose. For it left me and came again, left and came again, till at last I learnt its meaning.

Then and there I rose. 'I come, my love,' I said. And once more Walter Linton and his wife walked, as they had walked many a time before, hand-in-hand down the broad garden path; past the rustic lodge, covered with rosebuds and woodbine; through the gateway; out into the high-road. I feared nothing: the hand of the one I loved was in mine, and guiding me whither he chose; moreover, it was yet daylight, and I was not dreaming.

I even knew that Mr. Mainwaring followed us as we walked down the path. I saw him come to my side and look at me with wonder. I wanted no one to be near my husband and myself, so I waved him back imperiously. 'Follow if you like,' I said, 'but do not speak to us.' Perhaps he thought I was mad, perhaps that I was walking in my sleep, and, if so, feared to awake me. Any way, he followed us silently, and that was all I knew or cared about him, or about anything else. For were not my love and I

walking, once more, hand-in-hand, and it was not in a dream ?

Along and along the road, each side of which is beautiful with its green banks and hedges, and every inch of which we know, even keeping to that side we always choose because the flowers grow thickest there. How fresh and green everything looks this evening ! The swallows are flying here and there. Every blade of grass is washed clean from dust by the heavy rain of the morning. No. I am not dreaming. I am walking with my husband. A nightingale breaks into song near us, as we walk. We stop—who could help stopping to listen ? Now its melody ceases, and Walter leads me on. It is like in the old days when we were first wed ; before we thought or wished for more wealth. Those days when all the country round was fresh and new to me. Never did the wild-flowers, I think, look gayer than they look this evening, although they are closing fast. I would stop, my darling, and gather a bunch for the children ; but they have so many flowers at home, and I fear to loose your hand for a moment. Besides,

you wish to lead me further yet; we have somewhere to go to this evening. I forget whither it was you told me, Walter. Is it to the lily-pond, to see if we can find any snow-white cups floating, buoyed up by the broad green leaves? Is it to climb the hill that lies in front of us, and see the very last of the glorious sun; to catch the crimson sparkle of its rays on the distant windows of our dear home? That sun which will rise to-morrow, and waken us both so early—for you will never leave me again, Walter—promise me, my darling—I have been so unhappy. Is it further yet? To the ruins of the grey old abbey where the poet's ivy grows so freely? Shall we wait there, as once before, and see the full moon shine through the rose of the east windows? Shall we wander arm-in-arm through the dim shades, laughing at the foolish monks who chose to live and die there, knowing not love, nor the sweetness of life when two share its joys and troubles? But our troubles are over now, are they not, dearest? No matter, lead me whither you will: I care not—you are with me, your hand is in mine, and I am happy. But wherever

we go, we will walk back by moonlight, and then creep up quietly and kiss the children just once before we go to bed. To-morrow we will wake and love again. No, I am not dreaming. But why do you not speak to me and tell me where you have been—why you left me so long? Oh, how I have wept and waited for you! Dearest, you will never leave me again?

This is the spot you wished to lead me to—the place where the ferns grow? Ah, you remembered what I wanted. Are there any of that sort up there? Let us go and see, although the day is flying fast. Through the hazel bushes—deep, deep into the under-wood—on and on—up and up—brambles and stones! I did not know it was so steep here. Hold my hand firmer and help me. More bushes, more undergrowth; and how the twilight fades! My darling, we shall find no ferns to-night. May we not go back and come again to-morrow? Yet, on and on! Love, where you lead I follow and fear not! Is not your hand in mine, and you will never leave me again! Still on! My darling, you have brought me to the very edge of a

rock ! Don't leave me here ! Don't draw your hand from mine ! Stay one minute—one moment longer ! I cannot see you ; it is dark and cold ! I cannot feel you, and the world seems filling again with grief. Come back ! Come back ! Walter ! Walter !

* * * * *

They told me I dreamed it—that I walked in my sleep. Clever and learned men said so, and I am only a woman, neither clever nor learned. Mr. Mainwaring, who had with great difficulty followed us—for I say 'us,' in spite of all that wisdom can urge—found me lying lifeless at the brink of the rocky depth to which Walter had led me, and where he had left me. Down below me lay something that I, thank God, never saw. They bore it home and told me it was all that was left of Walter Linton, my husband. But I knew better, for had he not that evening walked hand in hand with me for miles ? They told me, also, that he had fallen from the top of the rock—that it was not a great height, but high enough for the fall to kill him instantaneously—that most likely he was led to that fatal place, seeking some rare

plant; as a root and withered leaves were clenched in his hand—that the notes he had placed in his pocket when he left his home were still there—that Draycot was still mine and his children's. But they believe me not when I tell them that my love, my husband, through the power of the love he bore me, could come from the dead—could take my hand in his and lead me with him, on and on, till he showed me where and how he died—till he saved those he loved from utter ruin and a life of penury—till, more than all, he cleared his own dear memory from stain and dishonour. Yet these things were !

MISS RIVERS'S REVENGE.

CHAPTER I.

It will simplify matters if I say at once that I am a strange girl. After this confession, you will be more inclined to believe that my story is a true one, and, it may be, condemn my conduct less. If your godfathers and godmothers think fit to give you a strange name, they can scarcely expect you to be exactly the same as other people ; and the name some one chose to christen me by is a strange one. ' Heritage ' is certainly not in common use, although, when one gets accustomed to it, it sounds soft and rather pretty, especially so when coupled with my surname. ' Heritage Rivers ' is not at all bad.

I am quite sure that in most instances people's natures accommodate themselves to

their names. Nearly all the Lucys I have known have been fair and romantic; nearly all the Janes and Susans homely and fond of housekeeping. A girl's career seems often to be settled by her name. So, having no precedent to show me what the owner of the name of Heritage should be like, I always plead it as an excuse for any peculiarities of disposition. Nevertheless, I am not called upon to dissect my mental qualities for the benefit of the inquisitive, so shall only say that one of my chief characteristics is that of being a good hater. I like and respect a good hater. No doubt, it is unchristianlike; but it is *so* natural. I am not ashamed to say that if people injure me, I don't forget or forgive until I feel I am about even with them. Of course, if anyone who had wronged me asked forgiveness, I should forgive freely enough—I don't see how that can be avoided—but I should never be eager to do my enemy a good turn unless I felt quite sure of heaping coals of fire upon his head! Now you know what manner of being I am; and very dreadful the description looks as I write it; so dreadful, that I am obliged to

comfort myself by thinking of the reverse of the picture—that I can be as true a friend as an enemy.

It is not so many years ago that I, Heritage Rivers, a slim girl of seventeen, left school, and stepped out into the grown-up world to meet what fate awaited me. For the time, my only idea was to enjoy my freedom. It was delightful to think that masters and mistresses were finished and done with for ever and a day. So I bade them a glad adieu, and went down into the country to stay with an aunt of mine, and for several weeks revelled in sunshine and liberty. Then, in accordance with a solemn promise, I spent some little time with an old school-friend—one, like myself, just emancipated. Her people lived at Twickenham, in a delicious old house with a large garden. I was made heartily welcome. The mother took me to her heart as her daughter's dearest friend. The father, a courtly grey-haired man, with literary tastes and pursuits, was kindness and politeness itself; whilst Clara Ramsay's brothers were in an hour my devoted slaves and lovers. Surrounded by

such pleasant attentions, I began to realize the fact that I was now a grown-up young lady, not altogether unattractive, and so valued myself accordingly.

As the Ramsays were quiet people and kept little company, an announcement made by Mrs. Ramsay that a dinner-party was projected was sufficient to flutter our hearts. For several days before it took place, we discussed again and again the merits of the guests who were to be present. As Clara knew them all except one, her interest was centred on the probable appearance of this gentleman. As even her mamma did not know him, all information respecting him must be extracted from Mr. Ramsay, whose friend he was. Girls being inquisitive creatures, Clara, at breakfast-time, egged on by me, began her inquiries.

‘Who is Mr. Vincent Hope, papa?’

‘A friend of mine, my dear. A very clever young man, who will one day, I think, be a most distinguished member of society.’

So far as it went, this reply was satisfactory; but we wanted a categorical testimonial, not a general one.

‘How will he distinguish himself?’ asked Clara.

‘He is a rising author—little known as yet; but all that must come.’

‘O dear!’ sighed Clara plaintively; ‘I know exactly the sort of man. I have seen so many of them here. Of course he wears spectacles?’

‘I don’t think he does—or if so, I never noticed them,’ replied Mr. Ramsay.

‘You never notice anything you ought to, papa. But he is sure to have a horrid beard—unkempt and uncared for. They all have.’

‘He has no beard, I fancy,’ answered Mr. Ramsay meditatively.

‘Is he good-looking and nice?’ demanded the audacious Clara.

Mr. Ramsay looked much amused at his daughter’s question.

‘I find him nice,’ he said. ‘But what a chit of a girl like you may find him, is another matter—a very small matter. I should think that most people would call him extremely good-looking.’

‘Is he dark or fair—tall or short?’

‘My dear girl, I shall answer no more questions about him. Why don’t you imitate the discretion of Miss Rivers, who seems free from your failing—curiosity.’

I blushed at such undeserved praise; whilst Clara, to show her opinion of my false pretences, nudged me under the table.

Although Mr. Ramsay would tell us nothing more, we, in our idle moments, which were many, speculated a great deal as to the probable personal appearance of Mr. Vincent Hope. I had a certain right to feel some anxiety about the matter, as I was informed that it would be my lot to be taken in to dinner by him; therefore, it was a great comfort to me to hear he wore neither spectacles nor beard.

‘I know he will be delightful!’ cried Clara. ‘I feel sure the whole matter is arranged by fate. Of course he will fall in love with you at once! Who could help doing so? You will look so nice, Heritage!’

This is the way in which foolish young women chatter at times.

It would be my first dinner-party—an ordeal always trying to a young girl. Any-

way, I dreaded it. In spite of Clara's well-meant compliments, my mind was not easy. I mistrusted the appearance I should present. My new dress, I fancied, fitted me badly; and I was haunted by a presentiment that my hands and the backs of my arms were destined to grow crimson. So distressing were my fears, that, as the hour approached, I would much rather have joined the boys, who, not being admitted to the feast, had gone off for a jolly long row on the river—'to get out of it all,' they said.

As I dressed myself, I wondered whether I should quite know what to eat, what to drink; and above all, if any one should deign to speak to me, what to talk about. Perhaps, I thought, all this comes instinctively. If, happily, such is the case, could it be possible, as Clara boldly predicted, that I should carry the little world by storm? I took one last glance at the mirror. After all, I did not look so very much amiss. Then, a few minutes before the hour struck, I entered the drawing-room, feeling almost sanguine.

The guests arrived—two by two. ‘Like animals going into the ark,’ whispered Clara, who, having seen a little more society than I had, seemed quite at her ease. Mr. Vincent Hope, as became a distinguished man, was late. At least, it was not until a few moments before dinner was announced that Mr. Ramsay brought a gentleman to me and presented him.

We bent to each other; then, taking his arm, I joined the procession to the dining-room. Of course I dropped my fan, or something, by the way. This necessitated my cavalier’s stooping down to recover possession of it, thereby delaying all the couples behind us for a moment or two. I was beginning badly.

We sank into our appointed places, and as the soup was being handed round, Mr. Hope addressed a few ordinary remarks to me. Then I began to realize how shy—how stupid a person I was. The only words my foolish tongue seemed capable of forming were ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ Connected words had left me for an indefinite period. I felt my conversational shortcomings so acutely,

that it was some little while before I was able to look at my neighbour, except furtively and timidly.

He was tall, I knew ; that fact had made itself manifest as we walked arm-in-arm. I had also received a sort of impression that he was good-looking. At last, when able to really look at him, I found that Mr. Ramsay's account, so far as it went, was a true one.

The young man was undoubtedly handsome. His eyes—the feature a woman first looks at—were good : grey, I decided, with dark lashes. His face was pale, and bore a look of refinement. His forehead was high—not too high—and his chin was large, and gave him the appearance of possessing considerable force of character. Above all, his nose was straight, and his hands well shapen. Twenty-eight, I should have guessed his age. Altogether, a very creditable young man.

Fate had been kind in selecting this companion for me, if only I could find something to talk about—something so gifted a creature as he was reported to be would not

be bored with. Alas for me, the conversation field seemed to have become suddenly barren of flowers of speech—not even a bud was left! Yet amongst people with whom I am at home, I had never yet been accused of taciturnity.

For some short time the lady on the other side of him saved me. She appeared to know him, and complimented him on the success of an article in one of the reviews, which she attributed to him. He thanked her for her praise; spoke a few words on general subjects; then, as I suppose, in duty bound, turned to me and recommenced conversation.

In five minutes, I positively hated myself and Mr. Vincent Hope. It may be kindness to bring one's intellect down to the level of the listener; I call it conceit. If, in spite of my elaborate new dress, he could not help seeing I was but a schoolgirl, was there any reason why he should so plainly show me he saw it? Was there any reason why he should quite change the manner of his discourse as he changed his listener—should talk to me in a way he

evidently thought suited to my calibre? If he meant it kindly, what right had he to think I should esteem it kindness? I dare say I deserved nothing more; but who was he to judge of my deserts? It ruffled my vanity, and destroyed any self-confidence I was beginning to feel. The worst of it was, he meant no rudeness.

He did not even pretend to patronize me; he simply chose to talk upon subjects which he was pleased to think were well within my limited range. It was mortifying! I twisted up my dinner-napkin under the table, as a sort of vent to my vexation. Soon I grew desperate. I would show this man I was not the inane, empty-headed schoolgirl he fancied me, or I would perish in the attempt.

My fluency of speech came back as suddenly as it left me. On my own account, I began to talk—of topics about which I knew nothing—of places I had never visited—of people I had never seen—and of books I had never read.

He seemed amused at my new departure, and, I flattered myself, tried to lead me on

to talk. So talk I did, and thought no evil. It was not until I had once or twice gone completely out of my depth, right over head and shoulders, and was compelled to flounder back as best I could, that I fancied the wretched man was laughing at me—not openly, of course; his manner was politeness itself. Yet I had an unpleasant suspicion that more than once I had made myself an idiot in his eyes.

I positively detest people who have the misfortune to see me at a disadvantage; so, when I rose with the rest of the women and left the table, I felt that it would have been a great satisfaction to have given Mr. Vincent Hope's broad shoulders a Parthian stab with a dessert-fork. I had not been a success; and, what was worse, I knew it!

It was dull work in the drawing-room. The women were strangers to me, and talked about their own and their friends' affairs, in none of which I had the slightest interest. It was very hot too. I peeped out of the window, and saw the garden looking most tempting in the light of a lovely autumnal moon. How delightful it

would be if I could have one walk round it!

I doubted whether it would be quite right for a young lady to walk about the garden alone and by moonlight ; but the temptation was very great. After all, I have always found it much easier and often pleasanter to yield to little temptations of this kind than to resist them ; so I soon gave in. Even at the risk of a cold or a scolding, I would have one, just one turn in the soft September night.

I slipped from the room, covered my head and shoulders with a shawl, and stole through the library window which opened to the ground.

The change from the close atmosphere of Mr. Ramsay's drawing-room was, as I predicted it would be, simply delicious. The clear sky, the full moon, and the bright stars which had tempted me out, made me feel quite poetical. I forgot all my little annoyance in the beauty of the night ; I became quite cheerful and happy. The one turn round the garden, which I had pledged myself not to exceed, grew to a great many ; yet

I was loath to leave the enchanting scene. But duty must not be altogether neglected. With a sigh, I turned for the last time, and began to retrace my steps to the house. To my horror, as I neared it, I saw the French casements of the dining-room open, saw the flood of brilliant light which poured out partially eclipsed as one dark body after another passed through the aperture. I realized in a moment the frightful position in which I was placed. The men were coming out to get a breath of fresh air and to smoke a cigarette before entering the drawing-room. What could I do? I was certain to be seen. By the light of the wonderful moon, everything was as clearly visible as by broad daylight. I shrank from the polite ridicule with which my nocturnal wanderings were sure to be greeted; in truth I was now rather ashamed of the freak which had led me into such an awkward situation. I wished to extricate myself without having to make excuses and explanations, and as I shuddered at the thought of walking boldly past the knot of gentlemen, I was compelled to adopt the alternative—concealment.

On the lawn near to me grew one of those conical trees—a species of laurel—the foliage of which touches the ground, and leaves the centre nearly hollow. This particular tree was so large that it formed a natural summer-house, and to enable it to fulfil its mission, an entrance had been cut through the boughs on the side farthest from the house. It was the very thing—a perfect harbour of refuge !

Careless of insects, heedless of the twigs which caught and tugged at my hair, but groaning, nevertheless, as I thought of my new frock, I rushed inside, unseen and, I hoped, unheard, resolved to wait behind the friendly boughs until the voices which I heard in the distance died into silence. Feeling quite sure that no one would be likely to explore the leafy recesses of my hiding-place, I began to grow easy in my mind, and even ventured to compliment myself upon the cleverness I had displayed. My triumph was short-lived. In a few moments I became aware that voices were drawing near to me—so alarmingly near, that very soon I was able to recognise them and distinguish

what they were saying. It was Mr. Vincent Hope and his host, who had strolled away from their friends.

‘You have a fine specimen of the Portuguese laurel here,’ said the former.

‘Yes,’ replied Mr. Ramsay. ‘It’s a fine tree of the kind. They seldom grow larger. Indeed, this one is beginning to die down. There is an entrance cut on the other side ; so it makes a shady, but uncomfortable, warm-weather retreat.’

Then I knew that the two gentlemen were coming round to the entrance. I was in despair. I cowered down in the darkness, and prayed that Mr. Hope’s curiosity might not induce him to pursue his botanical researches into the interior. I saw his head and shoulders fill up the entrance and hide the moonlight falling there. For the moment, I was undecided whether to shriek with horror, to endeavour to scare him away by growling like a wild beast, or to lie still and trust to chance. On the whole, the last seemed the wisest course to adopt. I breathed more freely when I found he had no intention of entering—the recesses were not tempting

at night. I hoped the two men would now remove themselves. But, alas ! my imprisonment was not yet to be ended. They stood exactly in front of the entrance, and from my hiding-place I could hear every word they spoke.

CHAPTER II.

MUCH as I disliked that young man, I was bound to confess that he looked provokingly handsome as he stood bareheaded in the moonlight, watching the wreaths of smoke from his cigar curling about in the still air. I could now scan him quite at my ease. My courage had returned, and I felt myself insured against discovery. My only dread was that the two men would begin to talk secrets. In such a case, my keen sense of honour must, of course, make me reveal my presence. I made a firm resolution that I would not play at eavesdropping. Alas, for poor humanity ! In a minute I was straining my ears to catch every word. Yet how could I help it ? Heritage Rivers was the subject of their discourse.

‘I hope you found your companion at dinner a pleasant one?’ said Mr. Ramsay.

‘Oh yes; very pleasant,’ replied Mr. Hope carelessly. ‘She’s a nice sort of a girl, I dare say.’

A nice sort of a girl! The wretched man! I hated him!

‘We think a great deal more of her than that,’ said that dear old Mr. Ramsay.

‘Indeed,’ replied his companion, without evincing the slightest interest in the matter.

‘Yes—indeed and indeed,’ echoed my old friend. ‘But, joking apart, did you not notice she bids fair to be a most beautiful woman?’

It would have needed little more to have brought me from my lurking-place on purpose to kiss that good old man!

Vincent Hope laughed quietly.

‘To tell you the truth,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I noticed her much. She seemed to me of the ordinary schoolgirl type. I don’t care much for schoolgirls.’

I dug my nails into my hands and ground my teeth. Handsome as the man looked in

the moonlight, I could have killed him then and there.

‘Yet,’ said Mr. Ramsay, ‘I noticed she talked pretty freely to you.’

The shrug of Mr. Hope’s shoulders almost maddened me.

‘Yes; but sad nonsense,’ he said, ‘although it was rather amusing at times. Of course, it’s not fair to judge her now. She is very raw, and, I should say, rather awkward. If properly looked after, no doubt she will grow up to be a decent sort of a young woman.’

Raw and awkward! He spoke of me—*me*, whom many of my school-friends called Queen Heritage, from the stately and dignified manner I was supposed to assume at times. A decent sort of a young woman! That I should hear a man, one, moreover, in his own opinion a judge on such matters, gravely set this up as the standard to which I might arrive—if properly looked after. It was too much; the fall was too great. And as the horrible thought flashed across me that his description might be true, his prediction correct, tears of sheer mortification sprang

into my eyes. Even Mr. Ramsay's almost testy rejoinder gave me no comfort.

'Oh, nonsense, Hope ! She will grow up a beautiful, accomplished, and clever woman. You judge her wrongly. Talk to her again in the drawing-room ; there she will be more at home.'

'All right, I will,' the wretch answered. 'But at present I want to talk to you about more important things than young ladies. I have to-day been offered the editorship of the *Piccadilly Magazine*. Shall I take it ?'

'I congratulate you. But it is too serious a matter to decide out here. We will talk it over by-and-by. We must join the ladies now. I see every one else has gone in.'

'Then I suppose we must,' said Mr. Hope rather ruefully, and tossing his cigar away with a half-sigh.

I waited a minute ; then I peered out, and at last ventured to creep round the laurel and reconnoitre. The broad back of my candid critic was just disappearing through the dining-room window. I shook my fist viciously at it. I watched Mr. Ramsay follow his guest, saw the window close and the blind fall ;

then I flew at top speed to the library, whence I had made my exit, entered noiselessly, and threw myself into a chair, feeling that my life was blighted.

The room was faintly lit up ; the door was closed ; I was alone with my misery ; for misery it was ; I use the word soberly and advisedly, without a thought of jesting. Fortunately or unfortunately, I had heard myself appraised at my true value. My merits had been weighed by an impartial hand ; I had been judged and condemned. I was a failure. 'Raw and awkward,' 'A decent sort of a young woman'—the words ate into my heart. No expressions could have been devised which would have wounded me more deeply.

He would give me another chance in the drawing-room. Would he ? I think not, Mr. Vincent Hope. No power on earth shall take me there to-night. I turn the gas up, and look at myself in the mirror. My hair is dishevelled, my eyes are red, and I cannot help fancying that my nose looks rather coarse. Yes ; it must be true ; I am not even good-looking.

Beneficial as it may be for one who is not

without vanity to learn the truth, I hate with a deadly hatred the man who has revealed it to me. Solemnly I declare, somehow, that some day I will have my revenge. I am very young, which is an advantage to one who may have to wait a long time for a certain object. O yes ; I can wait—even for ten, fifteen, or twenty years, I can wait ; but I will have revenge, full revenge. So I raved on and on, growing more tragical every moment, until I broke down, and began to cry again.

I had barely dried my eyes, when Clara entered the room.

‘What, Heritage!’ she cried ; ‘you here ! I have hunted high and low for you, but never thought of looking here. Come into the drawing-room ; we must sing our duet.’

I pleaded a splitting headache ; I could not bear the hot room. I should go to bed at once ; and in spite of Clara’s entreaties, to bed I went, and had the pleasure of dreaming that I was sticking stiletos and scissors into Mr. Vincent Hope. This was so comforting, that I was quite sorry when morning came and I found it was but a dream.

‘Wasn’t he delightful?’ was Clara’s first question when we met.

‘Wasn’t who delightful?’

‘Mr. Hope, of course. The other men were fogies.’

‘Now, Clara, look here. Once for all, I tell you I found that young man detestable—simply detestable! I hate him. I never met anyone I took such a dislike to.’

Clara’s blue eyes opened in amazement.

‘I thought you got on so well together,’ she said. ‘He asked for you in the drawing-room, and seemed quite sorry to hear you were ill. We all liked him immensely.’

He asked after me! A piece of impertinence—a gratuitous insult—a piece of superfluous hypocrisy, which, were it possible, made my wish for revenge stronger.

‘Well, I loathe him,’ I said, ‘and there’s an end of it. I won’t even talk about him.’

I was as good as my word, and Clara, for the want of a listener, was obliged to desist from ringing the changes in praise of Mr. Hope.

I left Twickenham two or three days after this. As I drove to the station, Mr. Hope

—most likely on his way to the Ramsays' house—passed the carriage. Clara was with me, so the young man bowed to us collectively. I made no sign of recognition.

‘Heritage,’ said Clara, ‘that was Mr. Hope. Didn’t you see him?’

‘Was it?’ I replied. ‘I had quite forgotten what he was like.’

For a beginner, this was a pretty good fib. After telling it so calmly, I felt I was getting on. ‘Raw and awkward!’ Oh no! I did not forget either the words or the speaker. When I declare vendetta, I mean it.

Five years passed by. I was twenty-two. I had seen many people and many things. Either for better or worse, I had changed in much, but still retained my knack of never forgetting a foe or a friend. Incredible as it seems, my anger against Mr. Hope was keen as ever—my wish for revenge as strong. The injury he had unwittingly done me had been greater than, even in my first burst of rage, I had imagined. During the interval his words kept recurring to my mind, and

hindered the growth of proper confidence and self-esteem. A long series of pleasant little social triumphs alone permitted me to say at last that his prophecy had not been fulfilled. But now, after five years, the more I thought of the annoyance, even anguish, his words had caused me, the more vicious I felt towards him ; the more resolved to compass revenge when the opportunity occurred. Oh yes ; I was a good hater—not a doubt of it. I could carry my stone seven years in my pocket, then turn it and carry it seven years more, or twice seven years, never for a moment forgetting its ultimate destination.

But when should I have the chance of hurling it, and how should I act when the chance came ? Except in the street, casually, I had never since met the man. Vincent Hope visited no friends of mine save the Ramsays. They left Twickenham shortly after my visit, and now lived a hundred miles from town. I had stayed with them several times, but my foe had never appeared. Of course, I had heard a great deal about him. He was now quite a famous man. To keep myself posted up in the light literature

of the day, I was compelled to read his books, and in honesty I am bound to say I admired them, although I detested the author of them. Surely we must meet some day. I went out a great deal, and I heard he was much sought after. But our paths as yet had not crossed.

It was winter. I was spending some weeks with new friends, who had taken a great fancy to me—kind hospitable people, who liked to have a constant stream of visitors passing, but very slowly, through their house. The Lightons were a wealthy county family, noted for their open-handed hospitality. I never stayed at a gayer or pleasanter place than Blaize House. It was not very large; but from the way in which it seemed to extend itself to accommodate the numerous guests, my belief is it must have been built on the plan of an accordion. I can only account for its capabilities by this theory.

Except from the tiny village which gave or took its name, Blaize House was miles away from everywhere; but its resources, so far as amusement went, made it immaterial in what part of the world it stood. The

family consisted of Mr. Lighton—called by everyone, even his guests, the Squire; his wife, a fitting companion to him, who shared his pursuits and heartily seconded the welcome he gave to everyone; and two daughters, about my own age. These may be termed the nucleus, the standing congregation of the establishment. In addition, there were sons who turned up unexpectedly and at intervals; and two or three cousins were invariably sojourning there. Add to these, again, the floating population in the shape of visitors who came and went, and you will realize that it was a merry house.

Breakfast was just over; we had been longer about it than usual, the weather being too damp and drizzly to tempt us out of doors. Letters were being read with the last cup of tea. The Squire selected one from his pile, and tossed it over to his wife, remarking that she would be glad to hear the good news it contained. Then it went from hand to hand until I had the pleasure of reading :

‘MY DEAR SQUIRE,—

‘I have just written the delightful word *Finis* at the bottom of a page, which is the last of my last immortal (!) production. I will do no more work for weeks, but will take the train to-morrow and come to Blaize House, in time, I hope, for dinner. I do not apologize for this short notice, knowing there is even more joy within your gates over the uninvited than the invited guest.

‘Yours always,

‘VINCENT HOPE.’

Vincent Hope! It must be my enemy. The allusion to his literary pursuits put that beyond a doubt. My time had come! I could not have selected a fairer field on which to mete out the vengeance I had stored up. As I read that letter, I positively blushed with pleasure, so vividly that I feared people might jump at entirely wrong conclusions. I thought of nothing all day but the way in which my enemy was delivered into my hands. The delight of having at last the chance of paying out the critic for his criticism produced a frame of mind which seemed

to urge me to go into quiet corners and laugh at my own thoughts. I had plenty of time to mature my plans and draw soothing pictures of the effects of my revenge. I resolved to risk no chance meeting with the foe ; and feeling that a good beginning would be half the battle, before six o'clock I went to my room to arm for the fray.

Remember, I am confessing, not jesting. I sent for my maid, and bade her take down my hair and brush it. If, as her deft fingers braided my locks to my satisfaction, I had thought the girl would have comprehended me, I might have quoted certain lines of Mrs. Browning's which kept singing through my head :

‘ Comb it smooth, and crown it fair ;
I would look in purple pall, from the lattice down the
wall,
And throw scorn on one that's there.’

Anyway, she crowned it fair enough, and, by my express desire, clad me in my most becoming gear. Then, a few minutes before the bell rang, I sent her away, and stood alone before the cheval glass surveying my-

self with a contented smile. For my plan of revenge had at least the merit of simplicity ; it was to win that man's admiration—if *possible his love*. Upon the day when he offered me the latter, and I coldly and scornfully rejected it, I should feel that I had squared all accounts between us in a manner highly satisfactory to myself.

How do women win men's love ? I did not quite know ; but I fancied, if conducted properly, the operation was not of a difficult nature. I hoped and believed I should succeed. Although my resolution reads badly, and sounds even worse, I comforted myself by thinking that as I meant to refuse what I laid myself out to win, no one would dare to censure me or accuse me of very unbecoming conduct. And now what are my weapons with which to conquer ?

I look at myself in the glass. It may read like vanity, but I feel that old Mr. Ramsay's prediction is fairly verified. Although I blush as I appraise myself, I know I am no longer the slim schoolgirl—but that I am something not, perhaps, far off a beautiful woman. I am tall. My figure is certainly

good. My complexion will bear any test ; and something tells me I could, if I wished, make my eyes dangerous. So much for nature. As for art, I have chosen the prettiest of many pretty gowns, and my gowns now have a knack of sitting well upon me ; so I am not ashamed to walk gracefully across the room, and, courtesying to myself in the glass, say approvingly to my double : ‘ Yes, Heritage Rivers, you have grown into a very decent sort of a woman—a very decent sort ! ’ Having refreshed my memory by the repetition of that peculiarly galling phrase, I gather up my skirts and sally forth to victory.

Fortune favoured me. As the greatest stranger and last arrival, it would have been in Vincent Hope’s province to take our hostess into the dining-room, had we not been favoured that day by the presence of a county magnate, whose claim to precedence could not be lightly overlooked. It seemed but natural and part of the plot that the Squire should present Mr. Vincent Hope to Miss Rivers, and for the second time in their lives these two should be seated side by side

sipping their soup in unison—but this time, if wounded vanity was to be the result of the contiguity, Miss Rivers would not be the victim.

So I began :

‘ You have come straight from town, Mr. —Vincent—I fancied the Squire said ? We all call him Squire, you know.’

‘ Oh yes. He is an old friend of mine. But he called me Vincent Hope, I suspect.’

This gave me what I wanted, an excuse for looking him full in the face—an act which, besides being a fitting tribute to his fame, enabled me to observe how time had treated him. So I lifted my lashes and looked straight at him. If time had not been quite idle with him, it had treated him kindly. He was handsome as ever. The hair near his temples being just flecked with gray did not detract from his good looks. I thought his features looked more marked, and the whole expression of his face more confident and powerful even than of old. He had won success, and, no doubt, fully realized and enjoyed the fact.

‘Vincent Hope!’ I echoed. ‘Not *the* Vincent Hope?’

I guessed instinctively that flattery was not a bad gun with which to open fire. By this time his name was so well known that it would have been affectation to appear to misunderstand me. He bowed and smiled.

‘How delightful!’ I exclaimed, my look, I am ashamed to say, confirming my words. ‘Now, tell me how I should talk to you. Ought I to give you my opinion about all the characters in your books; or ought I to sit silent and awed, treasuring up every word of wit and wisdom you may let fall?’

‘Neither, I must beg. I have just thrown off the harness, and come down to enjoy the Squire’s clover. I am trying to forget there is such a thing as work in the world.’

‘Very well. I shall take you at your word, after, as in duty bound, saying I have read all you have written, so far as I know.’

His wish to avoid the topic of his own achievements may have been a genuine one, but, nevertheless, he seemed pleased with

my remark, and looking at me with a smile, said :

‘ Exchange is but fair. I scarcely heard what the Squire called you.’

‘ Rivers—Heritage Rivers.’

‘ Heritage Rivers,’ he echoed musingly. ‘ It is an uncommon name ; but I fancy I have heard it before.’

‘ Oh, please don’t say so, Mr. Hope. I did think I had one original thing to boast of—my name. How would you like, after looking upon all your plots as original, to find them but plagiarisms ?’

He laughed.

‘ Many are, I fear. But you are trespassing on forbidden ground. Let us seek fresh pastures.’

We did so. We talked all dinner-time. I think we talked about everything under the sun — talked, moreover, almost like old friends. When he differed from my opinions, he told me in well-chosen words why he differed. And as he spoke, I whispered ever and anon to myself : ‘ Raw and awkward—a decent sort of a woman.’ Yet, now, Mr. Hope was condescending enough not only to

listen attentively to my words, but to reply to them as if they had weight with him. All this was very delightful. The first steps to revenge were smooth and pleasant ones; for there is no need to say that I hated him as much, and felt as vindictive, as ever.

He was walking straight to his fate. I felt it when, just before Mrs. Lighton gave the signal for departure, he dropped his voice almost to a whisper, and was good enough to say that, to him, the peculiar charm of this particular dinner was that such an agreeable interchange of ideas would not be ended with the night, but might be resumed to-morrow. Coming as it did from such a famous person, I could only glance my thanks, blush, and look pleased at the compliment.

When, with the rest of my sex, I rose and walked to the door, I knew that his eyes were following me; and I knew also that, although clever, captious, critical those eyes might be, they could find little fault with my bearing or general demeanour.

At Blaize House it was understood that the gentlemen, especially the younger ones,

were not allowed to linger long over the wine. When they entered the drawing-room, I was sitting, almost hidden from sight, in a recess near the window. I noticed that Mr. Hope, as he came through the door, looked round, as if in search of some one; and as, when at last he discovered my retreat, his search seemed at an end, I could only think the some one was myself. However, we had little more to say to each other this evening. All the children of the house were his friends, and had many questions to ask him. We had music and singing as usual; but I made some conventional excuse, and did not take my share in them. Before we parted for the night Vincent Hope came to my side.

‘Surely you sing, Miss Rivers?’ he said.

‘A little. But I’m not in the mood to sing to-night.’

He pressed me to make the attempt, but I refused. Thinking I had done quite enough for the first evening, I kept my voice in reserve. But I talked to him for a short time about music, and found him well versed in the art, and, of course, an unsparing critic. He was very hard on the ordinary drawing-

room playing and singing, and by no means complimentary to the performers of the evening. I laughed, and told him how thankful I felt that something had warned me not to show my poor skill to such an able but severe judge. My words led him to believe that my talent for music was a very third-rate one. This was exactly what I wished him to think.

He was soon drawn away from my side, and we spoke no more until the general good-night took place, and the men went off to the billiard-room, and my own sex to their couches. Once more I courtesied to Miss Rivers in the cheval-glass, and told her she had surpassed my most sanguine expectations. Then, in a very happy frame of mind, I went to bed.

CHAPTER III.

VERY promising, too, were the events of the next day. I felt that the man I hated was paying me attention above my fellows. Of course, it was not marked enough to attract

notice, but attention it was, undoubtedly. He walked with me, and told me, among other things, a great deal about his early life and struggles for success. He was quite interesting, so much so, that I wished I could check these confidences. I feared that his talk might awaken a suspicion of sympathy in my mind, which would grievously interfere with my vendetta.

That evening, he repeated his request that I would sing ; but after the way in which I had misled him, I knew he only urged me for the sake of politeness. I began with one of those little ballads which he so much disliked ; an easy, simple little thing, which could only be borne out of the commonplace by feeling on the part of the singer. I glanced at him as I finished the song. He thanked me quietly, but I saw he looked puzzled. Then I placed Beethoven's 'Adelaide' before me, and sang it as I had seldom or never before sang it—entirely to my own satisfaction. I rose from the piano, and our eyes met. He did not join in the chorus of thanks ; but I knew he was more than moved ; and as he followed me to my chair,

I exulted, as I thought that the pet weapon in my armoury had struck well home.

‘Miss Rivers,’ he said, ‘I thought no amateur in England could sing that song to her own accompaniment as you sing it. I can only congratulate you, whilst blaming you for deceiving me so, last night.’

I thanked him for his compliment; and for the rest of the evening Mr. Hope talked little except to me.

There!—I will write no more about it. Now, I am utterly ashamed of it all. Had it not been for my resolve to reject it when offered, I would have stooped to win no man’s love—not even Vincent Hope’s. But in five days I knew that my work was done, and fully done—so fully, that I dreaded the result of it, and began to wish I had not been so vindictive. Worse than all, friends—as friends will—were exchanging knowing glances, and commenting on the relations which appeared to exist between my foe and myself.

Could I have conquered my nature, and decided to forego my revenge, it was now impossible to do so. For my own sake,

matters must come to a climax, that all might see how little I cared for the man.

One night, as I sat in my dressing-gown over the fire, trying to make up my mind to tear myself from the pleasant glow and get into bed, Mabel Lighton entered my room. She was a good true girl, who spoke her mind freely, and at times lectured even me.

‘Heritage,’ she said abruptly, ‘what do you mean to do with Vincent Hope?’

I could not for the life of me help changing colour, and was compelled to shield the cheek nearest Mabel with the fan which had been protecting my eyes from the firelight.

‘Do with him! I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Yes, you do,’ retorted my mentor. ‘Had it been any one but you, Heritage, I should have called her a flirt. But you are not a flirt, we know.’

‘What have I done, Mabel?’ I asked. The screen was still between us.

Mabel quietly pushed it aside; then, placing her hands on my shoulders, scrutinized my face in a most uncomfortable manner.

‘You have done this, and who can wonder

at it? You have gained that man's love entirely. But, although it seems so unlike you, I believe you have brought him to your feet for vanity's sake. Heritage, he is a good man—a proud man. If you mean to give him nothing in return, I should say his life will be wrecked. Do you love him, or are my fears well founded ?'

In some fashion, I was bound to reply. I sought refuge in levity.

'When I am moved to confess my sins, Mabel, it will not be to you, but to some nice ascetic High-Church curate.'

'Don't talk nonsense. I am in bitter earnest. Vincent Hope will surely ask you to be his wife. You are rich, and he is comparatively poor ; but I know that will not influence you. Only I say again, if you refuse, you are to blame for all that happens.'

This must be stopped at any cost. Until now, I had always believed that hysterics and affectation were synonymous.

'Mabel,' I said, 'I hate Vincent Hope ; but at this moment I think I hate you even more ! Go to bed. I am too tired to say another word ; so go away.'

Therewith, I got into bed, turned my face to the wall, and left Mabel to put out my candle and get back to her own quarters when she thought fit.

I was annoyed and ashamed. She had nearly accused me of what I had in truth been guilty of—making love to my enemy. As people noticed my conduct, it became more and more necessary that I should clear myself from all such imputations. This could be done in one way only.

Perhaps I had the grace to avoid Vincent Hope somewhat during the next two days. Perhaps that very avoidance hastened the catastrophe. But on the third day, chance—pure chance, mind—left us together and alone. For a moment there was silence between us; then he drew near to me, and said in a quiet earnest voice :

‘ Heritage, I love you. Will you be my wife ?’

I could not answer. All I could do was to prevent myself breaking into hysterical laughter.

He tried to take my hand.

‘ Heritage, my darling ! I think I loved

you the moment I saw you. Look up, and answer me. Say you love me, and will be my wife!

His wife! After hating him for so long—after Mabel's reproaches—after winning his love in a way the thought of which made me blush! Never, never, never!

So I steeled myself—drew myself up to every inch of my height—looked him full in the face—triumphed, and took my revenge. I hope and think I spoke composedly, if not coldly.

‘Mr. Hope, you honour me greatly, but it cannot be. Please never mention it again.’

His face was very pale; and when an expression of positive pain left it, grew stern, almost hard. My manner must have convinced him I was in earnest. No doubt, had I wished to do so, I could have made him fall at my feet and plead passionately. But then, unless one is an utter savage, vindictiveness must be limited. I had done enough.

Perhaps, under such trying circumstances, no man could have behaved in a more dignified manner than did Mr. Hope.

‘I am to understand,’ he said calmly, but

with a look in his eyes which I dared not meet—‘I am to understand you—you do not love me?’

I bowed.

‘Please let me hear you say so,’ he said.

‘I do not. Let us say no more about it. I think I will go back to the house now.’

We walked in silence until we were close to the gates. Then he said :

‘Unless my presumption to-day makes my presence unbearable to you, I shall stay two days longer, as I promised Mr. Lighton. It is not worth while to set people inquiring as to the reason for a hasty departure.’

‘Certainly not,’ I answered. ‘Stay as long as you wish ; or, if you prefer it, I will leave.’

‘That is out of the question,’ he replied, as we crossed the threshold and parted.

I went to my room—to exult, of course, in my revenge. It was so full, so complete, so exactly as I planned it. And writers and poets say that revenge is sweet. Oh yes, it was very, very sweet—so sweet, that I double-locked the door, that no one might see how much I enjoyed it—so sweet, that I threw

myself on my bed, and thought my heart must break as I sobbed and wept ; for the truth must be told—I loved Vincent Hope even as he said, and as I hoped he loved me. Yet, for the sake of vanity, I had to-day rejected the love of a man, the best, the noblest, the cleverest in the world ! I had hurled my hoarded stone, and right well it had fulfilled its mission ; but its rebound had crushed me. Oh yes, revenge is very sweet !

I rose, and walking up to the Heritage Rivers in the cheval-glass, shook my fist at her violently. ‘You fool !’ I said to her. ‘A nice mess you have made of life ! Revenge, indeed ! Call it by its right name—folly ! Go and clothe yourself in sackcloth—cover your head with ashes, and cry your eyes out for to-day’s work.’ Then Mabel’s words about a wrecked life came to my mind ; and although I could not believe that the happiness of such a man as Vincent Hope could be dependent upon an idiot like myself, I thought of that strange look I had seen in his eyes—that look which no resolution of mine could make me meet. So I went back to bed once more, and cried and abused

myself. Ay, revenge, forsooth, revenge *is* sweet!

In spite of all, I determined to go down to dinner. I would do that much for his sake. It should not be suspected that anything had gone wrong between us; and I knew that, if I stayed away, Mabel, for one, would certainly guess what had occurred. This, if I could prevent it, should be known to no one. I smiled grimly as I thought how my revenge must fail in this; that the world would never know what I had scorned and refused. I made a great effort, dabbed my eyes with rose-water, and went downstairs in passable trim.

To-night we were not side-by-side, but sat directly opposite to one another. Mabel was right—Vincent Hope was a proud man. His discomfiture was no concern of the world's, so he showed no traces of it. All save one at that table would have said that his heart was gay and light. No one would have dreamed that, a few hours before, his love had been refused by an idiot of a girl. He laughed and jested; anecdote and witty repartee fell unceasingly from his lips. He held the whole

talk, or every unit of the party talked to him. Yet, woman-like, I noticed that he drank more wine than was his usual custom, and at times there was a sharper, harder ring in his voice. Had it not been for this, and the remembrance of the look which still haunted me, I could have believed he had forgotten or brushed away from his mind the events of the day. Vincent Hope was a proud man, and Heritage Rivers a fool !

I would rather say nothing about the next two days. I hated myself so much, that I wonder I have ever forgiven myself—perhaps I never have. All I care to say is, that none even suspected what had happened ; even Mabel began to think that the accusation of flirting should lie at Vincent Hope's door, not at mine ; for although he talked to me when needful, it was easy to see that his manner was changed.

The morning of the third day came, and I knew that in a few hours we should shake hands, part, and there would be the end of everything.

Blaize is fifteen miles from a railway-station, and that station is so unimportant

that very few trains stop at it. Vincent Hope, to reach town that evening, was obliged to start betimes. Soon after luncheon, Charlie Lighton and the dogcart were waiting to take him to the train ; and after many expressions of regret from host and hostess, he took his seat and was ready to start. Of course, our hands met, as, in common with everyone else, he bade me adieu — a quiet, polite adieu, nothing more—not even coupled with the conventional wish that we might meet again. Why should he wish to meet me again ? Our encounters as yet had not been happy in their results to either ! That accomplished whip, Charlie, gathered up the reins, and with a last, all-embracing good-bye, Vincent Hope was sped away along the winding carriage-drive, and, for the first time in her foolish life, Heritage Rivers knew that such things as broken hearts may be found outside romances.

Something was afoot that afternoon—walking party or skating party ; for it was the middle of January, and bitterly cold. Now that the necessity of keeping up appearances for another's sake was at an end,

Miss Rivers felt very much like breaking down and disgracing herself. She longed for solitude, and made some excuse to stay at home. As everyone was bound on the expedition, she had the house practically to herself. After bemoaning her wickedness and folly for some time in the sanctity of her own chamber, a strange craving came over her. She felt she must go down and sit in the little room which adjoins the library ; and, although censuring her own weakness, she yielded to the impulse.

Vincent Hope, in spite of his resolve to spend his time at Blaize House in well-earned idleness, had been unable to do so exactly. Ominous rolls of printed matter came by post—a sin of long standing, he said, which publishers insisted on dragging into daylight at once. So he did one or two hours' work each day, and grumbled at it in a very amusing manner. By tacit consent, the little room had been kept sacred to him ; there, when he chose, he worked without fear of interruption. It was no doubt on account of this that Miss Rivers felt that uncontrollable desire to sit for a while in this

particular room. The stupidity of her desire need not be commented upon, as her generally idiotic nature must have made itself manifest many pages back. She entered the room and closed the door softly. She sat down at the leather-covered table, and leaning her head on her hands, looked anything but a prosperous, healthy, comfortable young woman.

Presently she glanced stealthily around her, and from the bosom of her dress drew out a photograph of a very handsome, distinguished-looking man. Mr. Hope had given it to her, at her request, some days before. It was to go into her celebrity-album, she told him. Laying it on the table between her elbows, Miss Rivers gazed at it long and earnestly, until her foolish eyes became so misty with tears that she could see it no longer. One by one those tears began to fall, and soon came so fast that she gave in altogether—forgot where she was—forgot all risk of interruption ; and laying her head on the table, presented the very picture of woe.

Her bewailings and beweeplings were at their greatest height, when the door was suddenly thrown open and Mr. Hope stood

before her! She sprang to her feet, and in her agitation brushed the photograph to the ground. Even in her dire confusion, the prayer that it might have fallen face downwards framed itself. But she dared not look to see; she had to face the intruder as best she could. Yet he seemed for the moment taken even more aback than Miss Rivers. He stammered out something about a shaft broken three miles from home—impossibility of catching train—come back to write telegrams, etc. Then he looked on the ground, and what he saw there was enough to make him glance wonderingly at the shamefaced girl who stood before him with wet lashes and glowing cheeks.

‘Miss Rivers—Heritage!’ he said, ‘tell me what this means.’

She made no reply, but endeavoured to pass him. He blocked the way, and by the exercise of some force, took both her hands in his. As they stood there, she could see on the ground between them that unlucky photograph lying face upwards.

‘Let me go, Mr. Hope,’ she said. ‘It is unkind to keep me against my will.’

Her appeal was vain. His strong hands held her yet more firmly. He seemed to be waiting until she chose to look up and meet his eyes. But that would never have been—not if they had stood there till the present moment.

At last he spoke ; his voice was almost grave :

‘ Heritage, I am very proud. I have always vowed I would ask no woman twice to be my wife ; but I will ask you once more if you love me.’

Miss Rivers only bent her head lower and lower.

‘ Answer me, Heritage !’ he said, in a changed, passionate voice. ‘ My darling, answer me, and this time truthfully !’

It was no use. Had she wished to do so, she could fight no longer. She ventured to raise her eyes a little, and said, so timidly, so differently from her usual way of speaking :

‘ If I thought you would only forgive me, I would try and show you what I cannot, will not tell you—how much I love you !’

She was very, very humble in her new-found happiness.

Then Vincent Hope loosened her hands a little, and—— Well, these things only happen once in the life of a true woman, and she should neither write nor speak about them. But when Charlie Lighton came to look for the telegram, not even written, nor, in the proposed form, to be written, Vincent Hope and Heritage Rivers were wondering, as every orthodox pair of lovers should wonder, why they were chosen out to be made the two very happiest people in the whole world.

So this was how I worked out my revenge.

It was only after we were married that I ventured to tell my husband that I had actually laid myself out to win his love—and why, when won, I had rejected it. My confession, which was really seriously made, being complete, he looked at me with mock severity.

‘Heritage,’ he said, ‘had I known this before, I might, even at the eleventh hour, have thought better of the step I was taking

in putting my future in the hands of such a vindictive young woman.'

'And perhaps, sweet sir,' I answered, 'for the very fear of that, I have deferred my explanation until now.'

THE DAUGHTER OF THE STARS.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL ROMANCE.

CHAPTER I.

I HAVE no friends—no ambition; so the following strange events are not recorded for anyone's pleasure, or to win for myself the reputation of being able to weave a marvellous tale. I write in the hope alone that chance may bear in these pages a message to one with whom I have no means of holding intercourse, unless it be in a mystical way, as between spirit and spirit.

My name is Philip Beauvais. My residence, when I am not roaming over the world, The Firs, Thornborough—a small town in the West of England, almost within sound of the rush of the Severn. My father, as my name will show, was French. He

left his native country during one of her periodical troubles, and before order was re-asserted and he was free to return, had won my mother's heart, married, and, strange to say, settled down to a quiet English country life. He was no needy fortune-hunter, being in possession of good means ; and as my mother, the last member of an old family, was an heiress, the death of my parents, which occurred whilst I was very young, left me blessed with riches, which, as yet, have brought me little happiness.

My boyhood was lonely and sad. I was sensitive, and like all sensitive boys, unpopular with my kind. My guardian and trustee was a lawyer in London, in whom my father and mother had placed implicit confidence ; and well, from a business point of view, did he discharge his trust. But he was a bachelor, and, if not positively disliking children, understood little about them, and the need of young hearts for kindly sympathy. He had no home to which he could take me, or rather no home in the true sense of the word, so my boyhood was very dreary. University life was to me little

better ; there I was almost as solitary as I had been at school. I studied hard, and as the powers of my mind grew, became a dreamer of strange dreams—indeed, lived almost in a world of my own creation, full of quaint fancies and poetic ideas. I was always shy, perhaps constrained, in my manner ; and although, with manhood opening before me, I lost the feeling of unhappiness that clouded my boyish days, it seemed to me that it was my lot to stand alone in the world, and, as friendship was understood by me, call no man my friend.

At last I took my degree and quitted Oxford without joy or without regret. Fancying I should like to see the old home once more, I went down to the West of England.

The Firs, during my minority, had been let, furnished ; but the tenant having quitted a few months before, I had resolved it should not again be occupied by a stranger. Knowing it possessed a well-stocked library, I thought I should be as happy in my own house as elsewhere, so installed myself in the old country mansion, and began, even at my early age, the life of a recluse.

It was in January that I took possession, and the months passed on, yet I stayed. May came, with all the sweetness of the season, but it made little change in the manner of my life. In truth, I was settling down to a melancholy existence. I lived in books and dreams alone. Now, as I look back upon those days, it seems to me that the only breaks in my seclusion were the long walks which I was fain to take for the sake of health. In one of these walks, when, towards evening, I was returning home, as I sauntered through the lane, with its green hedge on either side, I was overtaken by a fellow-pedestrian. I remember I was holding the delicate frond of a fern I had plucked : it seemed to me a rare species, and I intended carrying it home to identify it. As I walked, looking at it and marvelling at its beauty, footsteps sounded beside me, and the most melodious man's voice I have ever heard said :

‘ You are fortunate in finding that specimen in these parts ; I have never met with it so far west before.’

I turned as he spoke, and found by my

side a man of about fifty. He was tall and well-built, dressed in the ordinary attire of an English gentleman; but, although his pronunciation was perfectly correct, something in the inflections of his voice told me he was of another clime.

I forgot how he named my fern, but he evidently knew its genus, and after examining it closely, returned it to me, and still continued to walk by my side, giving me an interesting little descriptive account of the curious ferns and plants of other lands. Then he drew me adroitly into conversation, till we touched on many other topics. On every subject he seemed equally well informed, and, without the least suspicion of pedantry, spoke lucidly and pleasantly, completely drawing me out of my usual reserve. By this time I had observed he was strikingly handsome, and as, after a fashion of my own, I had studied faces all my life, I said to myself, as I noted his wide brow and massive chin, ‘This man has great intellect and immense force of character; he is a giant, and I am a dwarf beside him. He has, or should have, lordship over his fellows.’ Still

conversing, we reached the main road, and soon stood before the gate of my house, when, conquering my natural shyness, I begged him to enter and look at a rare edition of a book which we had been discussing a few minutes previously. He smiled.

‘I should have called upon you long ago, Mr. Beauvais,’ he said, ‘but heard such accounts of your unsociableness I dared not venture. It needs a bold man to disturb a poet, as I hear you are.’

‘Not a poet,’ I replied ; ‘a dreamer only. Sometimes I think, could I but embody those dreams in verse, they would be poems ; but there I fail.’

‘Tush !’ he answered. ‘The true poem, the soul of it, is the dream ; the mechanical verse is but the garb that clothes it, the flesh that makes the existence of the spirit known to the outer world.’

With this we entered, and I led him to my library. He cared little for books as books ; indeed, he seemed to carry the contents of every volume I could show him in his head. Never had it been my fate to meet a man of such intellect and such eclectic

knowledge, or a man who could use the wisdom he possessed so aptly in conversation. He sat near me, and hour after hour entranced me with his marvellous talk. Each and every subject seemed alike to him, and my interest and wonder at his resources grew and grew, till they culminated when, as the night wore on, our talk turned on supernatural subjects and the mystical relation between body and spirit. Then it seemed to me his eyes dilated, his intellectual face glowed more brightly, whilst he spoke as I have never heard human being speak before or since. Daring theories, wild speculations, hints at strange knowledge of his own, scorn at the ideas held by the generality of men, fell in rapid succession from his lips, clothed in brilliant, poetic and original language. He spoke as one who knew, not as one who suspected; he planted his feet firmly where those of the deepest thinkers tread with timid steps. He held all the conversation, and the night advanced as I sat, enthralled, and listened as he tore to pieces the assertions of the most eminent writers of every age and country who have treated the subject upon which he spoke.

One of his lighter diatribes, I remember, was in ridicule of the so-called spiritualism of our day.

‘Not,’ he said, in conclusion, ‘that its disciples are without an inkling of the truth. Take away the absurdity of tables and tambourines, and the bare fact of a spirit being summoned by a more powerful spirit-force is reasonable enough.’

‘You believe, then, in the power of will?’ I asked.

‘I believe in the power of strong will over weak will, as I believe in the power of strong body over weak body. If by physical force I can make a body captive, why by excess of spirit-power should I not enthrall a spirit? You look incredulous, but I may perhaps give you a proof. But now, Mr. Beauvais,’ he continued, with a rare smile and complete change of manner, ‘I am sure I have tired you with my wild talk; let us turn to lighter subjects.’

I protested, and truthfully, that my interest in the present conversation was keen; but he only smiled in answer, and adroitly turned into other intellectual pathways, and then,

leaving them, gradually drew me to talk of my own affairs.

Recalling the conversation of that evening, I can see now that he appeared in many instances to prompt me in what I told him concerning myself, and that he seemed already to know much about my usual habits and manner of life during the last few years. That life had as yet been uneventful enough, and having no possible object in concealing any page in it, shortly he knew as much about myself as I could tell him. I am not egotistical, so perhaps he soon noticed that my interest in the turn the conversation had now taken flagged, for he rose, and with courtly politeness bade me good-night, exacting before he went a promise that I would pay him a return visit on the morrow. He wrote his name and address on a card, which he handed me, saying, 'Your servants will tell you where to find my house; I shall expect you to-morrow evening, and we can then resume our conversation.'

'And you can give me the proof you promised of the power of will, or spirit, as you term it?'

‘Nay, I can do that now. See, it is just twelve o’clock. At one o’clock you may retire to rest, not before.’

As he spoke, he fixed his deep, lustrous eyes on mine. It seemed to me his glance only rested on me for a second ; but I saw the courteous smile fade from his face, which became calm and stern. I suffered no inconvenience ; I did not even, I believe, lose consciousness, for I remember I fancied I heard him close the door as he left the room, and then, in a second, as it seemed, I turned in my chair and the clock on the mantelpiece struck one.

A trick, I thought, and hastily drew my watch from my pocket—it recorded the same time ; and then, greatly puzzled at the occurrence, and full of curiosity as to my mysterious acquaintance, I retired to rest. I should add that the card he gave me remained between my fingers, and bore these words : ‘Pedro Cardenas, The Hermitage.’

The next morning I asked my house-keeper whether she knew the gentleman who had been my guest the night before, and learnt from her that his house was about

three miles away, and that he led a life of the strictest seclusion. He was reputed to be very rich, but little or nothing was known for or against him. He had lived at the Hermitage about five years, and kept one servant only, a man who village gossip said was a Frenchman. Two gardeners went twice or three times a week to keep the large grounds which surrounded the house in order, but they had never been inside the house itself.

In fact, from her report, I gathered that a little mystery hung over the place and its inhabitants ; so after the perplexing event of the night, I needed no further incentive to make me direct my steps to The Hermitage as promised.

I had little difficulty in finding the house ; indeed, although I had not specially noticed it, I had often passed it upon my solitary rambles. It stood back some distance from the road, entirely hidden from view by a high wall which encircled house and gardens. A large iron gate—firmly locked, I found—closed the entrance to the drive. I rang the bell, and the gate was speedily opened by a sedately dressed man—a foreigner evidently.

I must have been expected, as he at once led the way along the winding drive to the house, which, to my surprise, looking at the extent of the gardens around it, was comparatively small. It appeared simply a comfortable residence, without any pretension to elegance or to modern improvements.

My guide conducted me to a small, well-furnished room, and in broken English begged me to be seated.

In a few minutes Cardenas appeared, and as he greeted me cordially and inquired after my health, hoping he had not trespassed too much upon my time the evening before, I fancied his features bore a faint smile of good-natured mockery.

‘Have you dined, Mr. Beauvais?’ he asked; and upon my replying in the affirmative, suggested a walk round the gardens before it grew dark.

His gardens were beautiful; smooth expanses of lawn running up to groves of fine old trees, and here and there, beds whose foliage told of the glowing beauty they would bear in a few weeks’ time. I expressed my admiration, adding :

‘You take a great interest in horticulture?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Not at all, but I have an object in keeping a good garden. You shall know it some day; but not yet.’

Our tour finished, we returned to the house, and the evening, like the night before, flew all too rapidly as I listened to his conversation. And as I sat and saw his wonderfully expressive face, that seemed to change with every subject he touched, as the theme was gay, grave, or abstruse, I felt that this man was exercising a strange influence over me—an influence that increased every hour. Naturally, I asked him about the trance, or whatever it was, into which I had fallen at his command. He smiled, and said: ‘That is nothing; I will show you more wonders than that, some day. That is,’ he added, as though speaking to himself, ‘should I find you worthy.’ Several other enigmatical sayings like the above, whether dropt intentionally or by chance I know not, served to raise my new-born curiosity to the highest pitch, and to make me resolve to fathom

what mystery he was hinting at. However, for the present, I could guess or learn nothing.

My visit that evening was the commencement of an intercourse almost daily. Evening after evening I sought The Hermitage. The cordial welcome that Cardenas always gave me banished all my shyness and fear of intruding. I spent in his society hours of happiness, of which as yet I had only dreamed. Encouraged by his sympathy, drawn on by his approval, I poured out my heart to him ; I told him my wildest dreams, confided to him my most secret aspirations, feeling I had at last found the friend for whom I had sighed so long. In short, he was my instructor, my counsellor, my all but father. I cannot say our confidence was reciprocal. He told me little or nothing concerning himself ; and upon my asking him once some question as to his early life, and how he had obtained his wonderful accumulation of wisdom, he replied : ‘Some day—soon, it may be—you shall know all, but the time is scarcely come yet.’ By now I was convinced that this wonderful man had some

strange revelation to make when he might think proper, but its nature, when that hour came, surpassed all my expectations.

We sat one evening in the room we generally occupied; the window was open, and the summer night crept on slowly. The sky was cloudless, and above us shone the stars. We talked, or rather conversed, but little. Cardenas seemed in a strange mood, and as he looked upwards at the heavens, was whispering words in some language unintelligible to me—I fancied it was Arabic. Light rain had fallen during the evening, and the sweet scent of the freshened earth came through the open window. The night was, indeed, so beautiful, that I was quite content to sit and enjoy it in silence; but my placid reverie was at length broken by my companion, who thrilled me by saying, in deep impressive tones :

‘ Philip Beauvais, the hour has now come when I choose to tell you why I sought you, why I have made you my friend and companion—I, who have spoken to few men for many years.’

I listened attentively, and could see his deep, dark eyes shining in the starlight.

‘To-night,’ he continued, ‘at my bidding a new life opens to you. Moreover, to-night you shall see the one who is destined to share it with you—the being who shall hold the love of your body through this life, and the love of your spirit for ever.’

My surprise at this mysterious communication kept me from speaking ; but the thought flashed through my brain, ‘This man, after all, is but a charlatan, and will probably produce a magic crystal or some such device ;’ but before I could speak, he rang a bell that summoned his servant.

Juan entered, bearing a lamp that threw a soft light. Having placed it on the table, he departed in his usual sedate and noiseless manner.

My companion then pressed a button in the wall, and I could hear a bell ringing at a distance. As he removed his hand, he laid it on my arm.

‘Wait!’ he said, almost sternly ; ‘wait, and say nothing until you behold what I now would show you.’

He appeared to be labouring under some unusual excitement; his manner and voice seemed changed: so it was with the intensest feeling of curiosity I fixed my eyes on the door, and kept silence as commanded.

The door opened, and a maiden more beautiful than ever poet dreamed, than ever artist painted, entered. Yea, as she stood there in her loveliness, my heart leapt forth to meet her, and I knew that unless I could win her love, life for me would be but weariness and sorrow. She had crossed the threshold with a light, quick step, as though hastening to rejoin one she loved; but, becoming aware of my presence, halted with downcast eyes and clasped hands.

I stood spell-bound, gazing at her face and marvelling at its beauty, until Cardenas advanced, and, taking her by the hand, led her towards me.

‘Astræa, my daughter,’ he said, ‘know him and speak to him, even as you would to me.’

She raised her eyes to mine, and her eyes shone as the stars above. Her hand rested in mine for a second; and then, seating her-

self by her father, she murmured some words, a question apparently, in the same strange tongue previously used by him, and which from her lips sounded yet softer and sweeter.

By this time I had regained possession of my senses, and could observe her more closely. What particularly struck me was the unearthliness of her beauty—the radiancy of it. Fair as she was, it was yet the spiritual character of her loveliness that raised her charms so far above other women's as the heavens are above the earth. Her dress was composed of some rich material, strangely made, but showing the shape of the perfect figure it covered. Rare jewels shone upon her hands, arms, and neck, and from her hair blazed a diamond star. She was young—certainly not more than nineteen years of age.

We spoke little during that interview. In truth, I was so perturbed at the strangeness of our meeting, so bewildered at the words her father had spoken before she appeared, that I was like one in a dream. I made a few remarks, which she answered in well-chosen words, but was content for the greater part of the time to sit still and gaze upon her,

as she sat on a low ottoman by her father, with her graceful head resting on his arm and her fingers caressing his. In little more than half-an-hour's time, probably in obedience to some intimation Cardenas gave her, she rose and bade us good-night. Her hand again lay in mine, and as she had conveyed to my excited heart a wild sort of idea that she was a being from another sphere, I felt a positive relief when I found my fingers close round warm flesh and blood. Gracefully as she had entered, she left us ; and as the door closed upon her I turned to Cardenas and exclaimed, ' Oh, my father, give me but her love, and I will be your slave for ever ! She is more than mortal.'

' She *is* more than mortal,' replied Cardenas, in his deep tones. ' Listen, and I will tell you the history of her birth.'

So speaking, he extinguished the lamp, and in the starlight he told me ; and as he unfolded the marvellous narrative, his voice, ever melodious, seemed to shape itself into a song, and as I listened I knew, be it truth or falsehood, he for one believed every word of the tale he told.

‘Years ago, Philip Beauvais, I stood among the mountains of Spain, my native land. Night after night I gazed alone at the stars. I watched them from their first faint gleam at eve till their last faint gleam at morn. Not as an astronomer, seeking to win a little fame by foretelling the advent of a new comet ; not to bring some distant speck of light, hitherto unnoticed, into the family of the planets. No : I, who by that time had proved that my spirit—my will—was stronger than any mortal’s, said, as I watched, “ Amid that shining space there are myriads of spirits, free or embodied, and among those myriads there may be one whose power is not equal to mine ; as I have swayed the spirits of men, so may I perchance influence one spirit in the outer space and draw it unto me.” The thought may have been the thought of a madman, but nevertheless it took full possession of me, and day and night I concentrated every faculty of my mind to compass this one desire. I said, in answer to all objections my sober reason raised, “ As there are weak minds with mankind, so may there be weak spirits in space, whose powers, although far

above the average of mankind, may be below my own, and one of these I may command." So I waited and watched, until one night, when having sent my will forth in such a sustained effort that I had well nigh fainted, *a thought spoke to my thought* and said, "I am here! what wouldst thou have with me?" I knew I had conquered, and that one of the spirits of the stars was at my command. Then, *in thought*, I said, "Come unto me in earthly shape, take the garb of mankind, and we will be ever together." And I knew that the spirit said, "I obey!" and left me for the time.

'Two nights afterwards there came to me, as I sat alone in my room, a beautiful woman, dressed after the manner of the peasants of Spain. She stood before me, crossed her hands upon her breast, and said, "Master, I am come." And I said to her, "You will be mine and abide with me for ever, and teach me many things." Then the woman wreathed her arms around me and said, "Not for long, O love, but until this earthly frame is fretted away by the spirit it imprisons. Till then I am thine." And she

lived with me and taught me things that no men know, or even hope to know ; things that were I to give them to the world to-morrow would consign me to a mad-house. So different is the truth from the theory.

‘ Not for long did she stay with me ; but ere she died, or departed—call it which you will—she bore me a daughter, and then I knew I had not summoned her from her spirit-home in vain, and that the birth of that daughter was an era in the history of the world. I said, “ I will guard this child as the apple of my eye. I will rear her in utter seclusion, as she will need no companions save the divine thoughts which her origin will doubtless give her ; and when the time comes I will seek a man worthy, so far as human being can be, to mate with her. Pure he must be and spotless, free from worldly taint, and clear of crime or bloodshed. A poet, it may be, with lofty thoughts and inspirations ; and this man shall wed the Daughter of the Stars, and their offspring shall be the salt of the earth that shall leaven the whole. They shall be the poets,

the musicians, the thinkers, the statesmen—nay, even the warriors of the earth, till war shall cease to be. In time a new race shall replace the old, and the regeneration of the world be accomplished !”

‘ I have lived in many countries, and am far above the weakness of patriotism. History has told me that the trump that calls for progress and improvement in the order of things sounds first and loudest in England ; therefore, as the maiden grew older, I brought her here. Something I knew of you before we met, and now, knowing you as I do, I say to you to-night, “ Philip Beauvais, you are the man I have chosen for the great work ; and, moreover, for your own happiness.” ’

As his voice, which in uttering the last sentence seemed like the voice of one inspired, sank into silence, he rested his head upon his arm, and again fixed his gaze on the stars above.

For a moment I said nothing ; and then, as the first of many eager questions trembled upon my lips, he broke into a sort of invocation, using the soft unknown tongue I

have mentioned before. Then, turning to me :

‘Depart now,’ he said; ‘ask nothing to-night. You have heard what mortal never heard. Depart, and be with me again to-morrow.’

I obeyed, and left him ; not to seek my home, but to wander miles and miles under the clear stars, turning the marvellous tale over and over in my mind. Strange as it may appear, I had little doubt as to its truth. I had always a dim kind of belief in the supernatural. Cardenas, to me, was a man gifted strangely beyond his fellows. I had myself experienced, both directly and indirectly, the power of his will, so that, in the present state of my mind, it scarcely needed the remembrance of the radiant, unearthly beauty of the maiden I had seen to induce me to accept his narrative as true. The only doubts that harassed me were whether I was worthy of the high destiny for which Cardenas had chosen me, and whether I could win Astræa’s love.

Weary at last with walking and thinking, I reached home, and, as the summer sun

gathered heat, threw myself on my bed and fell into a profound sleep.

I need not say that few hours elapsed, after my waking, ere I again sought The Hermitage. Juan showed me into the room, where, to my delight and surprise, I found Astræa sitting alone. She greeted me without embarrassment ; I almost dared to think even with pleasure. Daylight made her if anything more beautiful. She wore no ornaments now, save the single diamond star, which to-day beamed with a peculiar significance in my eyes.

‘ My father is engaged at present,’ she said, ‘ and has bade me entertain you : let us go through the gardens.’

With a beating heart I followed as she led the way, and that sweet afternoon will ever linger in my memory. We wandered beneath the grand old trees, we gathered the glowing roses, we chased, like children, the butterflies from flower to flower. We talked, and the pure fancies she clothed in words were rich with grace and inspiration. The poetry of her simple nature would perforce have made the most prosaic listener feel for once as

poets feel. Judge, then, the effect her words and her beauty had on me. Then she led me to her room and sang strange songs to me. Such music was never heard on earth ; her fingers wandered over the keys, improvising as they went melodies fit for angelic choirs. The hours flew by, till, as the twilight gathered, I left her reluctantly, and more convinced than ever of the truth of the tale I had heard the night before.

And so I saw her day after day ; and each time she seemed more sweet, more radiant than the last. And then, how I know not, I learnt that my love was returned, and in burning words avowed the passion I felt. Hand in hand we stood before her father, whilst, with a look of supreme joy in his dark eyes, he blessed us. Since the night I first met my beloved he had told me nothing more of her history, and I, knowing how deeply the recital had moved him, forbore to question him. Perhaps he saw clearly that matters were going exactly as he wished, and that I needed no incentive save Astræa's supreme beauty and innocence to make me urge my suit when I saw a hope of success.

Now that her lips as well as her clear and truthful eyes confessed the love she bore me, I begged Cardenas to permit us to be united without delay.

‘My son,’ he said, ‘remember, you wed not only for your own happiness, but for the good of the world. I have much to teach you yet—much that is good and noble. You must wait a year at least, and during that time be my pupil.’

‘I cannot,’ I cried. ‘A year is an age—who knows what things may happen in the time! She may find how unworthy I am of her. One of us may die, and we may be severed for ever.’

And then, as I never prayed man before, I besought him to grant my request. He was for some time inexorable, but said at last, in reply to my entreaties :

‘I will do this for you. To-day I will wed you in spirit, a bond that is stronger than any earthly marriage or tie that man can make.’

That night he called us to him, and led us to a chamber which I had never entered before. It was situated at the top of the

house, a portion of the roof of which had been removed and replaced by a sheet of glass, through which I could see the stars shining as brightly as though nothing intervened. The walls of the room were hung with a material like old tapestry : this completely covered the walls and even the door—as Cardenas parted the hangings like curtains to allow us to enter. At one end was a small structure draped with white velvet, which I knew, at once, was intended for a kind of altar. Opposite was a divan or couch covered with rich silk. With the exception of a bracket projecting from the wall and bearing a lamp, these were the only objects I noticed in the room. There was none of the machinery usually appertaining to magicians and wonder-workers. He motioned *Astræa* to the couch, and seated me on the ground beside her. My head leant against her arm, and our fingers were interlaced. The maiden evinced no fear, but my heart, I am not ashamed to say, beat audibly.

Cardenas then extinguished the light, and placed another lamp, or chafing-dish, upon the altar. This was of curious shape, and

threw only enough light to make the outlines of objects visible. As I lay, intensely excited, with my hand clasped in Astræa's, I saw him sprinkle something on the flame. This, whatever it was, made little difference in its brilliancy, but soon a sweet odour gradually permeated the air, and whilst I was trying to remember whether it was the scent of anything I knew or not, Cardenas turned and fixed his eyes upon us with the same calm, stern glance which had so strangely affected me on the night when we first met. Remember, in this narrative I endeavour to explain nothing, I risk no speculations, I hazard no theories; I am content simply to record such events as happened. As Cardenas cast his eyes upon us, I felt the maiden's fingers close with a soft pressure round mine; I seemed to be sinking into delicious sleep; nay, I can even remember closing my eyes, when, suddenly, all grew radiant around me, and I knew, as if by inspiration, that my spirit and my thoughts mingled with another's spirit and another's thoughts. Words fail in giving an idea of this blended existence. It seemed that we

were near the altar, yet had the power of seeing the whole room in one glance, where, as I live, I could gaze upon our bodily forms lying as Cardenas had placed them, and wrapped in the deepest and most placid sleep. I heard marvellous strains of music ; I heard mighty words of song meet for those harmonies ; I saw the heavens above teeming with brilliant stars—stars as yet undreamt of—and it seemed that above the music and song a deep voice said, ‘ For ever and for ever.’

How long this spirit-consciousness and bodily-oblivion continued I know not, but at last it seemed that the music and the song grew fainter and far away ; the heavens began to fade, and little by little the strange scent of the incense arose, and again I seemed to sleep, but that second sleep was waking, for my senses returned, and I found Astræa’s hands still clasping mine, the room lit by the lamp I had noticed at first, and Cardenas bending over us as if waiting for our awakening. We rose ; and as I looked into my love’s eyes, I knew that during our trance my thoughts and hers had been as one.

‘Children,’ said Cardenas, as he joined our hands once more, ‘remember, your spirits are as one. You may be parted on earth, but not in space. Sin by one is sin by the other. One cannot rise or fall without the other.’

Then, trembling with awe, we passed under the upraised tapestry, and spoke no more that night.

CHAPTER II.

MANY and many a time, when I awoke of a morning, and, in my own home, saw only the commonplace attributes of life around me, I said, ‘I have dreamed these wonderful things;’ and then, as sleep left me and my full powers of thought came into play, I would lie and marvel at the mysteries now interwoven with my life. Regretting nothing : longing only for the hour to come when I might again see my spirit-bride, as I now called her : not, indeed, to her face, as by tacit consent we never mentioned the occurrences of that evening.

I saw her now less than before, as Cardenas insisted upon my company for some hours every day. He was engaged, he said, in developing the full powers of my mind, and everything this strange man taught me at this period seemed to tend to one goal, the improvement of the human race. If his ideas were erratic, they were colossal ; if his theories were false, they were magnificent. Men were eventually to become a race of demigods. Time he counted as nothing.

‘ True,’ he said, in reply to a question of mine, ‘ that it may be a thousand years before the consummation ; but what then ? I shall see nothing of my work in the flesh, but my spirit will see it. As the original progenitor of the Jews—call him Abraham, for sake of argument—by the force of his own character stamped his race with peculiarities that keep it distinct from others, so shall the far more wonderful race we give the world alter the whole tone of mankind, and when the present puny creatures are extinct and forgotten, my descendants will look back and honour me as the god from whom they sprung.’

And I, rightly or wrongly, sat at this man's feet and believed ! The months passed on, the dead leaves fell from the trees, and winter came upon us ; every sign of the fleeting year was welcomed by me as bringing me so much nearer to the day when the master should declare the probation to be at an end.

In February I received some tidings from my father's country, France, that changed the whole tenour of my life. A relative died, and on his death I was found to be entitled to some considerable property. It was absolutely necessary I should go to Paris to establish my identity, but I greatly disliked the idea of the journey. By this time my love and my teacher were so linked with my life, that I dreaded even a few days' separation. It was Cardenas himself who at last prevailed upon me to undertake the journey.

'My son,' he said, 'remember you have yet to play an important part on the stage of the world. Sweet as the repose of our present life is, it may be well for you not to forget the existence of mankind. Go. Astræa and I will watch every day for your return.'

And so, with a heart foreboding evil, I went. How strange it seemed to me, after the events of the last few months, to step into the every-day world again; how prosaic ordinary men and women seemed in comparison with my late companions! Wherever I might be, my thoughts flew back to the house that held my beautiful spirit-bride and her wonderful father. Everything else seemed dull and commonplace in my eyes, and ardently I longed for the time when I might be at liberty to rejoin them. Much to my annoyance, the business that called me to Paris was protracted; and when at length I began to see the end of it, the event occurred which has been fatal to my life's happiness. Simply to kill the weary hours, I visited, one evening, some place of amusement—a sort of ball, I believe it was; and as I leant, lonely and preoccupied, against the wall of the room, watching, but not thinking of the dancers, something in my manner gave offence to a Frenchman who had drunk enough wine to make him quarrelsome. The quarrel, however it arose, was nothing but an encounter between a drunken

bully and a contemptuous sober man ; but a blow passed, and a meeting was peremptorily claimed. Being half a Frenchman myself, I could scarcely, had I wished to do so, have avoided it ; and having always been skilful with the foils, had little inclination to baulk my insulter, and feared less as to the result of the duel.

We met the day but one after the quarrel, and I, who had never struck a blow in anger since I was a boy, found, upon crossing swords with my antagonist, and seeing the vengeful look in his sullen eyes, the lust for blood rise within me. For the first few minutes I was hardly pressed, and, being unused to fighting in earnest, wild and flurried ; but soon I grew calm, and fought well and steadily. My opponent was an accomplished swordsman ; yet, how I knew not, one of my passes went through his guard, and he fell dead at my feet.

I felt but little remorse. The man had fastened an unsought quarrel upon me, and, as I learnt before the engagement, was a well-known duellist. I felt sad that a man's life should be cut short, as I should have felt

had I seen him killed in a railway accident ; but I laid no blame to myself that he had fallen by my hand. He had insulted me, he had challenged me, and I was fighting for my own life. So confident did I feel of being in the right, that I refused to fly across the frontier, preferring to stand my trial. The insult had been so marked, the provocation so great, that the court acquitted me. As soon as I was released, I travelled as fast as I could to England, and reached my home late at night, longing for the morning to break, that I might again see Astræa, and in her love forget all troubles and annoyances. I was very anxious, as, strange to say, since the duel I had received no communication from her, whilst up to that time letters had reached me each day. I had written to apprise her of my return, so, late as it was, was scarcely surprised to hear that Cardenas was waiting for me in the library.

I found him in a thoughtful attitude, his head resting on his hand, his brows contracted : eagerly I advanced to greet him, with words of tender solicitude upon my lips. Waiving my proffered hand aside, he rose.

‘Away!’ he cried; ‘there is blood upon that hand!’

I staggered back, when, gazing upon me with a stern yet sorrowful expression, he said :

‘Philip Beauvais, you have shed human blood in anger. We meet no more.’

Distractedly I endeavoured to justify myself, but all my words were unavailing.

‘Right or wrong,’ he said, ‘I care not; a man’s life lies at your door, and with that life passes the lot for which I had destined you.’

Till that moment it had never entered my thoughts that his idiosyncrasy would lead him to dream of severing Astræa and myself; but as the truth flashed across me, all light and hope seemed to leave the world. I cast myself at his feet, implored and wept. I conjured him by the love he bore his daughter, by the love he bore me, not to part us; but the only answer I could get was :

‘It may not be; your hands are stained with blood, so you are no mate for the Daughter of the Stars.’

Driven to desperation, I cried :

‘Not only for myself, but for her I plead. She loves me; yea, and our spirits are one, linked together by your power, and your own lips said that nought could sever them.’

He paused, and said—not so much by way of reply, but as one communing with himself :

‘I think not; my power may be waning with increasing years, but it may yet be strong enough to keep your souls apart.’

‘But I will see her again!’ I exclaimed; ‘I will see her, even if I have to force an entrance into her chamber.’

Ever calm, he replied :

‘Leave this place to-morrow, and return in a week’s time, and it may be you shall be admitted.’

In vain I begged some word that hope might live on : all he would say was, ‘Come in a week’s time.’ And then, with a sad but kindly look on me, he departed.

Obedient to his command, I spent the next week wearily in a dull city; and when the stipulated time had passed, with beating heart stood once more before the gate of The Hermitage.

My summons was answered by an old woman, who informed me, as I listened calm with despair, that Cardenas had left his residence four days ago—she believed, not to return.

I reached my home somehow and threw myself on my bed, from which I did not rise for a month. The mental strain and grief combined brought on so severe an illness that for days I lay at the point of death. When I recovered—aye, even before I recovered—I commenced the quest of my life—a quest that even now is unfulfilled. I, first of all, sought the owner of The Hermitage, and inquired as to the whereabouts of his late tenant, and was informed that Cardenas had simply paid the rent to the end of his term and quitted, leaving no address. By the aid of a detective I traced them to Calais, and there the scent failed. Then I left England, and for three long years sought them through every large town of Europe. I lavished large sums in engaging skilled police assistance, and fainter and fainter my hopes grew with every report of failure. I fancied it possible that Cardenas

might bring Astræa forth from her seclusion, so if I heard of the advent of any genius in the artistic or literary world, any new poetess, artist or singer who was taking the world by storm, I hurried to the scene of her triumph, to convince myself she was not Astræa, my spirit-bride. I lived for the one object of regaining her, and with travel, search, false hopes and chilling failures, the years passed. One day, having to wait for a few hours in the old town of Rouen, as I walked in my usual aimless manner through the narrow streets, I came face to face with the man I had sought so far and wide. My heart leapt in my breast, and eagerly I sprang forward to hold him, lest he should seek to escape me. This action was needless, as he evidently had no intention of evading me. He knew me at once and stopped, and I, for some moments, could say nothing ; only stand and gaze at him, wondering if my good fortune was real. I could not help noticing that he looked older and more careworn ; but the intellect shone clearly as ever in his face, and his wonderful dark eyes still conveyed the impression of power and lordship over his fellows.

He spoke first, and strangely the melodious voice of old thrilled me.

‘You have sought me for three years,’ he said, ‘and now you find me. What would you?’

‘Astræa, my bride,’ I said wildly.

‘Poor boy,’ he said, with an air of compassion, ‘and you have suffered. Does the dream I bade you dream linger yet? Can you not forget?’

‘Never. Let me but see her once, and I will rest content for years.’

With calm pity, he said :

‘Would you be happier in remembering her as one who loved you, or as one who has forgotten your existence?’

‘Let me but see her,’ was my only reply, and my heart beat wildly as I fancied I saw him relenting.

‘Follow me, then,’ he said, ‘but indulge in no vain hopes, for I say that the poles of the earth are not further apart than you two will ever be.’

In silence I followed him, and soon we entered a large old house, and he showed me into a room on the first floor, where, near

the window, sat Astræa. Her beauty to my famished eyes seemed more glorious than ever, and with a cry of rapture I sprang forward to clasp her to my heart, but stopped short upon seeing her recoil with a look of unmistakable affright in those eyes that had ever before grown more radiant at my approach. It needed no more than this to tell me she did not even recognise me. As I stood spell-bound, with extended hands, Cardenas came forward, and speaking in the purest French, said :

‘My daughter, this gentleman believes you to be an old acquaintance of his. Vainly have I assured him he is mistaken, but only from your own lips will he be convinced.’

She made me a proud courtesy, and the words, ‘Monsieur is entirely in error ; I have never seen him before,’ smote upon my heart like the death-knell of that hope which alone made life endurable to me.

Thus speaking, she passed me with the evident intention of quitting the apartment ; but I seized her hand, and gazed long and deeply into her eyes. At first they met

mine with a firm, steady glance ; yet as I gazed I saw a troubled expression rise in their clear depths, even as though memory was striving to re-assert her reign ; but as my hope took form she withdrew her hand hastily and left us.

Mad in my rage, I turned upon Cardenas and cursed him.

‘It is a juggle,’ I cried. ‘You have stolen her memory of my love from her. Else she could neither forget nor be false to me.’

My angry words provoked no answering warmth on his part ; he only said, sadly :

‘I would have spared you this, but you were sure to discover us some day, and it was well you should learn the truth at once.’

‘What is the truth—she loves me no more?’

‘Listen, Philip. When I found you were no longer fitted to be my son, I bade you leave me, and I carried my daughter away that you might meet no more. As you sorrowed for her, so she sorrowed for you, and then I bade her forget the past. You, who know my power of old, will believe me when

I say that at my command that portion of her life vanished from her memory ; that all those months we spent together are to her a blank. Do you doubt ?'

'No,' I said, 'but give me oblivion likewise.'

'I cannot,' he replied ; 'I have not sway over you to that extent.'

'But our spirit-union ?' I asked.

I fancied he seemed troubled as he replied, 'That was all nonsense ; a mesmeric trance they call it, in which no doubt you dreamed strange things.'

I said no more, but, sick at heart at the result of my interview with Astræa, left him, noting carefully the house and the street, but utterly uncertain as to what future line of action to take.

That night, as I lay sleepless, vivid to my mind came the recollection of the mysterious ceremony in the tapestried room. Again I felt Astræa's fingers entwined with mine, my head resting on her arm. I saw the white draped altar, and before it the tall, commanding figure of Cardenas. It seemed to me that even the perfume of the strange incense

was in the air ; and as the scene rose again before me I cried, ‘ O sweet, my bride, come to me, for are not our souls for ever united !’

And then I knew that her spirit was with me, and that mine went forth to meet it. And all seemed joy, and we two were together once more. Her thoughts my thoughts, and my thoughts hers. Our existence one. Let our bodies be far apart, our spirits, free from the trammels of the flesh, could meet and wander forth at will. Let him who reads say, ‘ a dream ;’ I care not. It was no dream, nor was dream ever like unto this. Let science, now or hereafter, attempt to explain the mystic intercourse we held ; for me it is sufficient to know that in the depth of that night her soul sought mine, and, together, we wandered, or floated forth, under the clear stars. No words, as far as the world understands them, passed between us ; but plain as the letters my pen now forms on the paper before me could I read in some mysterious way each thought of hers, and, as I read it, knew that my answering thought was clear to her. I can only make myself at all understood by saying we

spoke in thought ; that our spirit converse that night contained little but the renewal of our unalterable love ; that as we passed beneath the luminous stars, shining, to our spirit-sight, with a radiancy unknown to human eyes—as the moon above, to us an orb of dazzling silver, clothed the world beneath us in light and shadow, we knew our destinies were linked for all time.

I cannot tell the duration of our intercourse that night. It must have been measured by hours, as I can well remember watching the moon sink into a bank of clouds on the horizon—clouds that to bodily eyes may have been dark, but which to us were glorious with veiled light—and then the morning star arose in splendour ; and then, as once before, all things seemed to fade as I felt I was sinking into sleep, only to awake with the sun high overhead.

O, the joy I felt as I recalled the events of that night ! I knew that Astræa's love, could the cloud that lay over her memory be lifted, was mine yet. Well I knew I had dreamed no dream ; but, marvellous as it might be, we had, free from all fetters that

would restrain us, that night held mystic communion. I felt no fear, no awe—joy alone at the strength of the bond that bound us together. I wondered if I had power to summon her at will ; yet dare not try, fearing she might suffer untold agony if a stronger power than mine withstood her. ‘I will wait,’ I said, ‘and my beloved will come to me at her own time. Some day I may learn what power is mine ; now I will only wait and hope.’

I thought I would try and see her again : for now she might know me, and, perhaps, in spite of her father’s wish, would follow me to the ends of the earth. I had no difficulty in finding the house, but was peremptorily denied admission. In vain I offered large bribes ; the servant was faithful to his trust, ‘Monsieur was away, and his orders were distinct.’ I left the house and longed for the night to come, hoping we might meet again. Alas ! it was not so. Neither in the many hours I waited and watched, nor in the few hours I slept, did she come.

The next day I sought the house once more, and in the servant’s face read, before

he spoke, the words, 'Monsieur has departed—I know not where.'

Although fearing that further search would be vain, I resumed the life I had been leading for the last three years, and wandered from town to town, ever hoping that Cardenas might again cross my path—a hope as yet ungratified.

And yet I am not unhappy. Again and again she has been with me. I know not when she is coming, yet suddenly I am aware that her spirit is with me and calls for mine. O, the rapture of those meetings! We wander forth over the face of the earth. We float through the dark pine forests of the north and the glowing wildernesses of the tropics. We see the grandeur of mighty mountains and the sweetness of peaceful valleys. We pass, at will, through great cities, over fruitful plains or arid deserts. We watch the bending of the Southern Cross, or the moon glimmering white on regions of untrodden snow. We cross the deep seas and seek fair islands unknown to man. Space to us is nothing. The world

and all its glories—yea, even the heavens are ours. We hear strains of wondrous music, and ours are the secrets of the stars.

Not only at night does she seek me now. Even in the sunlight, with the busy world around, she calls for me, and I obey her summons. And then I am told that I have lain for hours in a trance, motionless and scarcely breathing, and men look upon me as one whom Death may claim at any moment—I, who laugh at their fears and pray that the same sweet trance may be mine again to-morrow.

And latterly, she has sought me more frequently, and I know that her spirit grows more joyful. Can it be that the power that parts us is waning? That age is stealing the force from that strange and resolute mind that decreed her waking hours to be void of all recollection of our love? That, eventually, all the dominion he holds over her will be gone, his sway broken; that, at last, in her glorious beauty, she will come to me in body, as in spirit, and, standing before me, whisper, 'I am here!' when the bitterness of

the past shall fade in the light of the love
glowing in her radiant eyes ?

* * * * *

O Astræa ! Daughter of the Stars ! My
spirit-bride ! I wait—I long for that hour.
Let it be soon !

IN ONE SHORT YEAR!

IF the Rector of Chelston could cut out, obliterate, forget one short year of the forty-five he has lived he might be a happy man ; or as happy as a mortal may be, who recognises the responsibilities and duties of life.

His living is a rich one. He has no domestic worries or aggrieved parishioners. He is of good family—so good that he takes his place among the county people as much by right as by courtesy. In spite of his grave, not to say austere, manners, he has won the love of his parishioners and friends ; and if the world he rules spiritually is a little one, his writings have carried his name far beyond it. Certainly, the Rev. Percival Blake is a successful man, and could that one year be forgotten, might be a happy one.

The story of the year he would consign to oblivion is this :

Ten years ago, at half-past six o'clock on the 31st of December, the stars were shining brightly ; at eight o'clock the congregation coming out of Chelston Church found a heavy snowstorm raging. The wind had changed. An army of dark clouds had hurried up and was attacking the earth so furiously that already everything within range was white with snow.

The Rector's mother, a lady of stately presence, came down the aisle attended by her two daughters. She paused to address a few reproachful words to the sexton, respecting the low temperature inside the church ; then passed into the porch, which was full of members of the congregation preparing to fight their way home through the unexpected snowstorm. Wishing all present a happy new year, the ladies wrapped their cloaks around them, and at a brisk pace went up the lane which led to the Rectory.

There was warmth and comfort. The reflection of a roaring fire danced on every

polished oak panel of the dining-room. Mrs. Blake and her daughters gathered round the blaze like priestesses round an altar; and the bell was rung to show they were ready for tea.

It was a week-day. The service had been held to mark the last day of the year. The Rector, a sensible man, disapproved of midnight services. His flock were better in bed at such an hour. So he had given them the ordinary evensong, and preached a short suitable sermon. His work over, he was expected home every moment.

The tea came, but not the Rector. The cosy was put on the teapot, and the hot cakes placed inside the fender. The ladies sat toasting themselves and discussing who were and who were not at church.

Presently Selina, the younger daughter, looked out of window and reported that the lights of the church were extinguished. It was decided that Percival had gone on some errand of charity, so the ladies began tea without him. Mrs. Blake was filling the cups for the second time when the missing Rector entered.

Percival Blake was above middle height, and strongly but not clumsily built. His face must be described by a word which should convey more than 'handsome'—it was a fine face. If now, and when in repose, it wore an expression of contented indolence, it was, nevertheless, the face of a man from whom something out of the common might be expected.

The truth is, his life had been far too uneventful and easy. He possessed abilities which had never yet been fully called forth; he was capable of passion which had never yet been aroused. The sharp spurs of ambition and love had not yet gored his flanks. This may be understood when one knows that at thirty he was Rector of Chelston—and even now, at thirty-five, he had not met the woman he could love.

Young as he was when the late Rector, his father, died, his succession was a matter beyond question. The living of Chelston belongs to Lord Keynsham, and, as all the county knows, Percival's father was Lord Keynsham's first cousin. That the young clergyman was to stand in his father's shoes

had been settled long ago. He had been brought up to do so as surely as a merchant's son is brought up to enter his business.

So the boy was apprenticed to the trade. There was no question as to his fitness for the sacred office. The fact of his being his father's son settled this. He himself accepted his position as a matter of course, and after a creditable career at Oxford, settled down to do duty as his father's curate.

He was a conscientious man, and did his work well. But his life had been made too simple, too easy for a man of his powers. It seemed all arranged : beginning, middle, and end.

His father died. He took his place, his mother and sisters living on at the Rectory, and looking after the needs of the parish even as they did in his father's reign. At first they supposed Percival would marry ; after a year or two they believed, perhaps hoped, he would not ; now they looked upon him as cut out for a bachelor, and felt pretty secure of their tenure.

‘ You are late, my dear,’ said Mrs. Blake, as the young Rector took his seat.

‘Yes ; and cold and hungry too.’

They ministered to his creature comforts. He drank his tea and ate his muffins with gusto.

‘Your sermon was very powerful,’ said Mrs. Blake. ‘At times I think you preach almost up to your poor father’s level.’

‘Thank you,’ said Percival, suppressing a smile.

Preaching had not been his predecessor’s forte.

‘Percival,’ said Maria, his eldest sister, ‘did you notice a lady in black ? She sat in the south aisle.’

The laity may be confiding, but a clergyman’s mother and sisters know he is able, and often ready, to take stock of his congregation.

The Rector had noticed her.

‘We feel sure she is the person who has just come to The Hollies.’

‘She is. She told me so.’

‘Told you so ! When ?’

Three pairs of astonished eyes gazed at the Rector.

‘It is on her account I am late. Just as

I was leaving the church, old Jones told me a lady had slipped on the snow and sprained her ankle. I picked her up and carried her into the vestry.'

'You carried her! Couldn't you have left that to Jones—if necessary?'

'My dear mother! She was a fine young woman, weighing about twelve stone. Jones is past seventy, and getting shaky.'

This answer was unanswerable.

'Well?' asked Mrs. Blake severely.

'Jones went to the Red Lion for a cab, or some conveyance. I tried a little amateur surgery.'

'Alone with her in the vestry?'

'Her maid was there. A poor helpless creature, more hindrance than use.'

Helpless or not, Mrs. Blake was relieved at hearing about the maid. 'Was it a *real* sprain?' she asked suspiciously.

'The ankle was swollen to an enormous size. I was obliged to cut her boot off.'

'Oh!' gasped Mrs. Blake. 'And then?'

'I ascertained no bones were broken, bathed it with cold water, and bound it up, in a most workmanlike way, with my hand-

kerchief. Then Jones and the cab came. I saw my patient home, and here I am.'

The Rector of Chelston bathing and binding up a young woman's ankle in the vestry was more than Mrs. Blake could stand. She rose from her seat and gave her son her ideas on the subject.

'All I can say is, that carrying beautiful young women into vestries, attending to their ailments, and taking them home, is, in my opinion, an unclerical, if not a disreputable, proceeding.'

The Rector's cheek flushed, but he checked the hot retort which rose to his lips; still his voice and manner showed there was a limit to maternal authority and his own patience.

'I did not say she was beautiful. I would have done the same for the oldest and ugliest of my congregation. Good-night. I am going to my study.'

The ladies looked blank; the more so when the hours passed without his reappearing. It was their custom at the Rectory to watch the old year out, and exchange good wishes as the clock struck twelve. Mrs.

Blake grew very fidgety as midnight drew near, and was trying to bring herself to go to her son and ask his pardon. But Percival spared her this by returning of his own accord.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘you spoke hastily. But it is the last night of the year ; let us forget it.’

Mrs. Blake melted.

‘Oh, Percival, it was only from anxiety on your account.’

He laughed.

‘I am old enough to look after myself.’

‘Yes, my dear. But, Percival, who is she?’

‘I told you. Mrs. Russell, the lady just come to The Hollies.’

‘But *who* is she? No one knows anything about her. She may be an adventuress.’

‘Adventuresses are not likely to come to Chelston. Besides, we heard she bought the house, and I suppose has paid for it.’

‘Is she a lady?’ asked Selina—‘lady’ bore a very high meaning with the Blakes.

‘Undoubtedly. But you can call and judge for yourselves.’

Mrs. Blake made no objection to calling. Unless there was something known against her, the new arrival was entitled to a call from the Rectory folks. Besides, Mrs. Blake, still much troubled by the vestry episode, wanted to see Mrs. Russell, and form her own opinions.

Twelve o'clock struck, and after the usual good wishes the family party separated.

'What will the new year bring?' said the Rector as he undressed himself. 'Not much change so far as Chelston is concerned. That was a very beautiful woman,' he added.

The next morning, in spite of the four inches of snow, Percival Blake felt bound to walk to The Hollies and inquire after his new parishioner. The Hollies, a medium-sized house, stood in about half an acre of garden on the outskirts of Chelston village. At the back were meadows, and through the meadows ran the deep Chelston brook, or river, as the inhabitants were pleased to call it. The Rectory was half a mile from The Hollies, and Percival, as he walked the distance, had time to wonder why a beautiful young woman like Mrs. Russell should

choose Chelston as an abode. Not that society was wanting, provided one was duly accredited. But the county people are rigidly exclusive, and few enter the circle on their own merits. The impression Mrs. Russell had given the Rector was that of a woman who would scarcely be contented with the society of the doctor's and lawyer's wives and daughters, much less with that of the respectable farmers' women-kind.

Mrs. Russell was better. She was up, and would be glad to see Mr. Blake. The Rector hesitated—thinking of his snow-caked boots—but after some vigorous work with scraper and door-mat, decided that he might venture into a drawing-room, so he followed the servant to Mrs. Russell and his fate.

His first thought was that, high as he had ranked her beauty, he had under-estimated it. But then he had seen her in the dimly lighted vestry and while she was suffering great pain. Now!

An artist should have painted her! A sculptor should have fixed that attitude immovably in marble! She lay on a couch wheeled round by the fire. Her pose was

full of that grace which appeals so eloquently to the eye capable of appreciating beauty and symmetry of form. It was unstudied and natural, yet full of dignity. Moreover, the classical purity of her style was bound to tell upon a man of Percival Blake's good taste. Adventitious aids she had none. The thick dark shining hair was coiled simply on the well-proportioned head. Her dress was plain black, but fitting her so as to show every line of that splendid figure. The dark eyes, lashes and eyebrows looked darker, the bright red lips redder, from the contrast with the white face. White, but, if such words can convey the idea, warm-white. If colour was wanting on the cheek, no one would call her pale ; her complexion spoke of warmth, life, and health.

And Percival marvelled again that such a creature should bury herself in such a place as Chelston.

She greeted him smilingly. She gave him her hand ; it was white and well-shapen, but not diminutive. A tiny hand would have been a deformity with a woman of her splendid build. She thanked him for last

night's kindness. He hoped she was better, and complimented her on her fortitude. After this light skirmish of pretty sayings they settled down to general conversation.

Certainly a most interesting woman! She was animated; she was natural; she talked well; she questioned the Rector about the parish, the church, the schools, the neighbourhood, and other subjects which are clerical specialities. Then their conversation became more eclectic—literature, music, painting, even politics. After a little while the Rector found himself discussing and arguing, as if her opinion carried weight. As the Rev. Percival had a low opinion of the intellectual powers of women in general, this was a great compliment to Mrs. Russell.

The minutes passed pleasantly. At last the Rector felt that, so far as time was concerned, the obligations of duty and politeness had been discharged. He showed signs of leave-taking.

‘Spare me a few minutes more,’ said Mrs. Russell. ‘I have something to say.’

He reseated himself willingly enough.

‘I suppose you are all puzzling your heads

about me,' she said gravely ; ' your mother and sisters, for instance ?'

This direct attack confused the Rector.

' Chelston is a little place,' he said.

' And, like all little places,' she continued, ' much exercised about a new-comer ?'

' As you use the phrase, I may as well say it is the right one.'

' Well, Mr. Blake, I have no wish to be an object of curiosity or suspicion. In a village, the Rectory—not, perhaps, the Rector—is often the headquarters of gossip.'

Percival laughed ; but, remembering his mother and sisters, dared not deny the charge. Mrs. Russell looked at him with her great dark eyes, and smiled as she saw how correctly she had judged.

' I am right, then ? Well, Mr. Blake, if you are expected to give information, it is just as well you should be correctly informed yourself.'

' But I have no wish to know. It is not my business.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and just raised her eyebrows. The actions were, perhaps, bordering on coquetry. Mr. Blake

at once caught their meaning. His disclaimer of curiosity was not flattering to the fair woman beside him. He hastened to atone.

‘I mean, if I can be of service, please command me.’

He wondered at the eagerness of his own manner. She smiled.

‘I should like this to be known,’ she said. ‘I have no wish for society, and I bring no credentials. My story is this: My father was a well-to-do merchant in Liverpool. His name was Bennett. My mother died when I was an infant. I was an only child, and was utterly spoilt. My father’s kindness I repaid by marrying a man whom he particularly disliked. My husband died three years ago; my father shortly afterwards. He forgave me on his death-bed, and left me all he had to leave. He might well forgive me. I had long before repented of my obstinacy and folly.’

A hard look came into her eyes as she spoke.

‘You were unhappy?’ said the Rector sympathizingly.

‘More than unhappy—poor, unhappy, and—ill-treated. But that concerns no one save myself.’

She was silent. Her eyes looked far away. Her lips hardened and grew thin with a bitter smile. Percival Blake, watching her, knew that she had a past she would fain forget.

‘Thank you for your confidences,’ he said. ‘You are right, living in a small inquisitive world, to publish your antecedents. I shall tell the busybodies as much as seems good to me. And you really mean to live at Chelston?’ he continued.

‘I think so. I hated the loneliness of London. I have no friends, no relations. The fit seized me to try the country. I saw this house advertised. Chelston was the same to me as another place. So here I am, with a faithful old servant to look after me.’

‘You will find it terribly dull.’

‘One may be dull, yet fairly happy. I can amuse myself. I am fond of reading, of painting, of music. Perhaps, when you know me better, you will find me something to do.’

‘ Anyway, we must try and keep you now,’ said the Rector gallantly.

Then he took his leave, and went to perform less agreeable if less dangerous duties. He dared not confess to himself how greatly his interest had been awakened by the strange, uncommon beauty of this woman. But he dimly understood how it might be possible for a man to forsake friends, duty—even creed—for the sake of some one whom he pictured as not unlike his new parishioner. He was nearer to his fate than he imagined.

His account of his morning’s exploits spread consternation through the Rectory. With discreditable want of tact he praised Mrs. Russell to the skies. His mother and sisters at once took the alarm. Percival, after all, might not be cut out for a bachelor. The joint regency was threatened—not by one who would be a suitable spouse for the Rector of Chelston, but by a terribly beautiful young widow, about whom no one knew anything!

Nevertheless, they called at the Hollies, and Mrs. Blake’s heart sank as she saw that Percival had not been led astray by the

glamour of good looks when he declared that Mrs. Russell was a lady. Maria and Selina, the Rector's sisters, two plain, middle-aged women, who had outlived envy of another's personal charms, rather inclined to the new-comer; but their mother was obdurate. She shook her head ominously.

'There is a mystery,' she said. 'There is something wrong with that woman: I have a presentiment.'

Mrs. Blake's presentiments were not things to be trifled with.

However, a kind of reserved friendship sprang up between the ladies. Mrs. Blake looked upon it as an armed truce, under cover of which she could the better protect her son from the allurements of this mysterious syren.

But unhappily that son began to manifest a strength of will and determination to walk his own way, and, moreover, walked that way so far and so openly that the folks about Chelston began to talk: but even that troubled the Rector very little.

He had long left off deceiving himself. His fate had met him. He loved this

woman with all the strength of his really strong nature, and was striving, in deadly earnest, to make her love him. His passion had swept away all domestic barriers. Mother, sisters, everything faded into insignificance beside it. Life without that one woman's love was worthless. The touch of her hand, the look of her dark eyes, the sound of her musical voice, thrilled him. The Rector of Chelston loved at last—loved as only one man out of a thousand can love. His was not the sparkling transient emotion of a boy—not the dotage of the septuagenarian—it was the ardent glowing passion of a man—the love of a lifetime !

He blamed himself bitterly for this complete surrender to one dominant passion. He saw what dangers he might be led into, yet was helpless against his fate. His unhealthy state of mind was clearly shown him whilst he was engaged in the performance of a peculiarly painful duty. A son of one of his parishioners had murdered his sweetheart. He was now lying in the county gaol under sentence of death. It was reported that he was callous and impenitent. His father,

with tears in his eyes, begged Percival Blake to visit his boy and try and save his guilty soul. The criminal had once been the brightest of the village boys, and a great favourite of Percival's. Perhaps his pleading might succeed where another's failed. The Rector at once visited the gaol, and tried all his powers of persuasion to bring the convict to a proper frame of mind. But his labour was vain. The young man was quiet and respectful. He regretted the necessity for the deed, but not the deed itself.

‘I loved her,’ he said sullenly. ‘No other man should have her. I would do it again rather.’

Percival prayed and reasoned without moving him an atom. But the murderer at last turned to him and said :

‘You’ve never loved a girl like I did, Mr. Blake, or you’d have done just the same.’

Percival Blake turned pale. The thought struck him like a bullet—the man was speaking the truth. He—even he, the Rector of Chelston—would kill his love rather than another man should have her !

‘God help me!’ he groaned. ‘I must end this.’

So one bright afternoon in April he walked over to the Hollies and told Philippa Russell he loved her. He spoke fiercely and sternly, almost like one under compulsion. In fact, he all but commanded her to return his love, and perhaps she liked him none the less for his masterful bearing.

She looked particularly lovely that afternoon. Although living in solitude, she was always well dressed. Had she anticipated the visit and wished to hasten the avowal, she could not have attired herself more effectively. The man must be ultra-fastidious who could find a single fault in her personal appearance—or so thought the Rector as he waited her answer.

For a while she was silent. She stood with her white fingers interlaced. Her downcast eyes gave her wooer no sign, but a wave of colour crossed the healthy pallor of her cheek. Then she raised her eyes, and her look set every pulse in his body throbbing. In another moment he would have thrown his arms around her.

But she checked him, although she still gazed at him. She spoke ; her words were strange, but there was something in her voice which as yet he had never detected there.

‘Tell me how much you love me!’ she said.

‘I cannot,’ he whispered. In truth, he dared not even tell himself.

‘Tell me how much you love me!’ she reiterated.

‘Far above any being in the world.’

A scornful smile made her look even more beautiful.

‘Spare me the ordinary lover’s protestations. But stay,’ she continued, with a marvellous change of voice and manner. ‘I am treating you unfairly. Percival, listen. I love you ! I love you !’

She leant a little way towards him. The action was unmistakable. His arms were round her ; his lips on her lips. From that moment life held but one thing for the Rector of Chelston.

‘Tell me ; tell me *now*, Percival,’ whispered Philippa, as she lay passive in his arms.

Even then there flashed across him that

scene in the gaol. If he spoke the truth he need seek no further for a fitting simile. He bent his head, and whispered in a strange hoarse voice.

‘I love you even as that young man just hanged loved. I would kill you rather than you should love another.’

She laughed deliriously.

‘Sweet, sweet love!’ she cried. ‘I believe you! I love you!’

Then she laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed.

He adored her, yet he feared her. He was her master, yet her slave. She had wrung words from him which no man, certainly no clergyman, should dare to say; but she had told him and shown him she loved him. He led her to a seat, and, now that the victory was his, began to count the spoils.

‘We will be married soon, dearest,’ he said.

She pressed her hands to her forehead.

‘I did not promise to marry you,’ she said.

The Rector wondered if he heard aright.

‘Philippa, what *do* you mean?’ he cried.

All semblance of passion had left her. She looked at him with sorrowful eyes.

‘You asked me if I loved you. I answered truly. For the rest, you took me by surprise. Come to-morrow or the next day.’

‘But why. What is your meaning? You love me, and of course will marry me.’

She clasped her hands, then once more pressed them to her brows.

‘I am telling lies,’ she said. ‘It was no surprise to me. For weeks I have pictured this moment. Percival, there shall be no deceit between us.’

‘None on my part,’ he answered gravely.

‘And none on mine. I said, “Come to-morrow.” One day of pleasant dreaming—one day of your love—seemed worth having. To-day and to-morrow are the same. Sweet love, I love you! Hold my hand—listen—and leave me.’

He obeyed with a white face. She spoke for some minutes in a low voice. The gravity of her communication was shown by the change which the Rector’s face and bearing underwent. Save by one or two smothered exclamations, he did not interrupt her, and

when she had finished speaking, sat silent and motionless. She drew her hand from his and rose. His eyes followed her, and at last, with dry lips, he whispered :

‘ This is the truth ? ’

‘ This is the truth,’ she said, moving towards the door. ‘ Farewell. I leave here to-morrow.’

At the door she lingered and looked back. Their eyes met. A shiver ran through the man’s strong frame. Then, like one who makes, for good or ill, a sudden resolution, he sprang to his feet.

‘ What do I care ? ’ he cried. ‘ I love you. I cannot live without you. Let it be all forgotten, or borne together.’

Once more he embraced her. She made no resistance, no attempt to conceal the joy his decision gave her. But presently, drawing a little away from him, she said :

‘ Percival, if you give me your love in spite of all, it must be for ever. Nothing must part us.’

‘ It is for ever. Nothing shall part us.’

An hour afterwards the Rector walked

home, and informed his mother that Philippa Russell had consented to be his wife.

Mrs. Blake did not faint. She did not even revile her future daughter-in-law. Percival's manner told her that words to this effect would be wasted. But she entreated her son, by every claim she had upon him, to do nothing hurriedly. Of course, she objected to his desire ; but she knew her objections would have no influence upon a man so madly in love. But she prayed for delay—literally went upon her knees and besought him not to be married for twelve months. A clever woman was Mrs. Blake. Who knew what unforeseen things might happen in a year ?

Percival yielded to some extent. After all, before he married he must prepare another home for his mother and sisters. He wished to refurnish the Rectory. He wished to be married without undue haste. He wished to see his people friendly with Philippa, and he wished Philippa to get some idea of what a clergyman's wife should be. So he agreed to wait six months—even, when worn out by his mother's tearful importunities, extended

this time of probation till the end of the present year. In exchange, he stipulated that Mrs. Blake should try and bring herself to regard Philippa as a daughter.

He told Philippa what he had promised. She said nothing, but something in her look made him regret he had made the promise. However, he vowed that the first of January should be his wedding-day.

Mrs. Blake kept, at any rate, the letter of her contract with her son. The intercourse between the Rectory and the Hollies seemed so friendly, that it looked as if the Rector's mother was going to make the best of what she thought a bad job. Yet her presentiment was always with her. Although it was placed beyond doubt that Mrs. Russell had a considerable fortune, Mrs. Blake kept her presentiment, and prayed every night that Percival might escape from this siren. To do her justice, she was not anxious that he should marry money, so Mrs. Russell's fortune did not affect her views. Mrs. Blake played her part very well, and Percival was delighted when she suggested that Philippa should accompany her daughters and herself

to London, whither they always went early in June ; for Mrs. Blake, although but a country Rector's widow, was a woman of fashion and friends.

It is very possible that whilst pressing this invitation on Philippa Mrs. Blake thought : 'She has lived in London. A woman of her extraordinary appearance cannot be forgotten. Some one must surely know all about her.'

Although Percival begged her to go with his mother, Philippa hesitated.

'Have you forgotten?' she whispered.

He frowned.

'It is better to face what may be in store than to fly it. Nothing can part us.'

'Very well, I will go.'

She kissed him, and for the thousandth time told him how much she loved him.

A fortnight afterwards Mrs. Blake and Philippa were seated side-by-side at an evening party. The beautiful young widow was the object of much attention. Suddenly Mrs. Blake noticed that her companion stopped short in the middle of a sentence, and begged a gentleman near her to lead her

from the room—the heat was overcoming her. Then Mrs. Blake felt sure that something had occurred, and, looking round in search of it, saw a man leaning against the opposite wall and eyeing Philippa with amused wonder.

She knew him well—a rising barrister, with whose family she had long been upon terms of intimacy. So when he turned his eyes from the vanishing Philippa to her vacant chair, Mrs. Blake signed him to fill it.

She cut greetings and inquiries very short.

‘You know that lady who just left my side?’ she said.

‘I thought so. Perhaps I was mistaken. Tell me her name.’

She told him.

‘It must be the same,’ he said.

‘What do you know of her?’ asked Mrs. Blake.

‘The Law has its secrets as well as the Church,’ said the barrister, laughing.

‘Don’t jest, Richard Graham. I have known you and your family for years, and

I ask you to tell me who and what Mrs. Russell is.'

Graham glanced at her, and saw she was in terrible earnest. He hesitated, then said :

'I met her professionally. I was her counsel in a—an action.'

Mrs. Blake noted the pause.

'A criminal action?' she asked sharply.

'Well—yes, it was.'

'Was she acquitted?'

'No; but I believe she was innocent. I believe it firmly. The jury were fools.'

And this woman about to marry the Rector of Chelston! No wonder Mrs. Blake's agitation was great enough to puzzle the barrister.

'Speak low,' she said. 'What had she done?'

'Her husband—a fearful rogue—was tried for forging and swindling. The rascal tried to save himself at her expense. She was tried with him. The man was sent to penal servitude for five years.'

'Yes, yes—but the woman?'

'It was a burning shame,' said Graham.

‘On my soul, I believe she was innocent. The judge thought so too.’

‘Go on quickly,’ said Mrs. Blake.

‘Her sentence was three months,’ said Graham reluctantly and sullenly. He hated himself for having tattled about this beautiful woman’s antecedents.

‘Then,’ said Mrs. Blake, with emphatic pauses, ‘she has—actually been—in prison?’

‘I suppose so. But why do you want to know? I wish I had said nothing.’

‘I have a right to know all about her,’ said Mrs. Blake icily. ‘For the sake of sealing your lips, I may tell you that Percival intended marrying her. What an escape! In prison! What an escape!’

She sailed away in search of her daughters and Philippa. Her head was in a whirl. The Rector of Chelston about to make a creature who had worked on the treadmill and picked oakum his wife! Her presentiment had come true with a vengeance. She walked from room to room in search of her charges, and mechanically murmured: ‘What an escape! What an escape!’

Mrs. Russell was willing enough to go

home. Mrs. Blake's lip curled as she thought why. She said nothing, but before going to bed telegraphed to her son, bidding him come at once.

He came up by the first train the next morning. Mrs. Blake had managed to get Philippa and her daughters out of the way, so was able to meet him alone. His first inquiry was for Philippa. He seemed greatly relieved by hearing she was well.

Then Mrs. Blake made her communication. She was kind enough to suppress all show of triumph; but she told him everything, and wondered at the silence with which he heard it.

'Oh, Percival, my son,' she cried, 'what an escape!'

He looked fearfully stern.

'I hoped you would be spared this,' he said. 'I hoped it might remain unknown to all save Philippa and myself.'

'Percival! What are you saying?'

'I knew it before she promised to be my wife. She told me herself. Poor girl, she was cruelly wronged. Her life has been a hard one. Till her wretched husband died in prison it was misery.'

‘She deceived you—cajoled you! Percival! You cannot mean to——’

‘This will make no change in my plans. I shall be married on the first of January.’

Mrs. Blake really did succumb at the announcement. She fell, a dead heap, into a chair.

‘Graham I shall see at once,’ continued her son, ‘and entreat his silence. But even if the matter becomes public property it may be lived down.’

Mrs. Blake was goaded past endurance. She rose in fierce wrath.

‘Besotted boy!’ she cried. ‘You—in your position—Rector of Chelston—to marry a convict, a felon! Percival, I am ashamed of you—ashamed! I will go to the Bishop—to Lord Keynsham. It shall never be!’

In his present mood the names of the Bishop and Lord Keynsham were to Percival no more than sounding brass.

‘I am sorry, very sorry, mother,’ he said; ‘but I love Philippa too well to give her up; and surely, if one person above another should exercise Christian charity, it is a clergyman.’

‘Christian charity!’ said Mrs. Blake, with

biting scorn. 'Call it by its true name—blind, unholy passion!'

She left him, little knowing how deeply her parting shaft had struck.

He saw Graham; then returned and told Philippa everything. She listened with strange composure.

'I expected it,' she said; 'the past can never be obliterated.' Then she added, 'I do not even offer to free you. You are mine—mine for ever.'

The look which accompanied her words added another link to the chain which bound him to her.

It was impossible she should remain longer with Mrs. Blake. That afternoon, accompanied by the Rector, she went back to Chelston. Percival, who considered he was absolved from his promise to his mother, suggested an early day for the marriage.

'No, no,' said Philippa. 'Why change our plans? I have no fear of losing your love. No one shall say I have hurried you into marriage.'

Mrs. Blake's hopes revived when, in reply to a long, reproachful letter, her son informed

her that the previous arrangement would be adhered to. There was still six months' grace, so Mrs. Blake did not curtail her visit to town. She even went to the seaside for a few weeks as usual. Whilst 'that creature' was within stone's-throw, the Rectory was not an attractive residence.

At last she returned home, and it soon became an open secret that there was friction between the ladies of the Rectory and the lady of The Hollies ; but signs soon multiplied which told the Chelston folk that the Rector meant to have his own way.

In the late autumn a house was taken in the neighbourhood, and it was perfectly well known this was to be Mrs. Blake's house after the marriage. Whispers went round that Mrs. Russell had ordered an extensive trousseau from London. But all doubt was disposed of when the banns were called in Chelston church. Then Mrs. Blake's heart really sank. She had kept, and would keep, her own counsel. The world need not see the Rectory soiled linen. But after this public announcement, which she called an insult to God and man, she had another stormy

scene with her 'besotted boy.' He was more determined than ever to go his own way, so she washed her hands of him altogether. Perhaps she was not to blame.

Although he saw Philippa frequently, the days passed slowly with the Rector, and he longed for the moment which, for better or worse, would make Philippa his wife. In his secret heart he blamed himself for the boundless sway this woman exercised over him—even the strength of her love startled him. When they were married all would doubtless be well. In time his mother and sisters might come round. Surely, with his strong mind, he could make the woman who adored him a perfect parson's wife. In spite of everything they would be happy ; yet, as he told himself so, he knew that had the blackest misery been shown to be his lot, he must still have married Philippa.

The last day of the old year dawned, and Percival Blake rejoiced to think that to-morrow would end his uncertainties and troubles. He was now alone in the Rectory. Mrs. Blake, having sternly refused to attend the ceremony, or to permit her daughters to

be present, had by her son's advice, if not command, left the neighbourhood for a while.

Although he had been very busy all the day he had seen Philippa once or twice, and had promised to call again after the evening service. He preached his sermon, introducing a few fitting words about to-morrow's event ; then, having lingered in the vestry giving some last instructions to his subordinates, he started to walk across to The Hollies.

In going from the church to The Hollies, about two hundred yards were saved by turning out of the main-road and passing through the meadows which ran by Chelston stream. Although this route took one to the back of the house, he usually chose it, Philippa having given him a key which opened the garden gate. He went this way now.

It was a clear starlit night. The ground was turned into iron by a sharp frost. As the Rector walked briskly along the river path, he thought of all that had occurred since this time last year, when he bore Philippa into the vestry. Not now did he

wish this year taken out of his life. But he prayed that before the next year was over many things which now distressed him might be made right. It was a terrible thing to quarrel with mother and sisters, but then it had been for Philippa's sake. Heavens! how he loved that woman.

He turned from the river-path and struck across the field towards The Hollies. He had scarcely gone twenty yards when he heard a sharp scream ; and looking round, he saw to his right, some distance up the river-bank, two dark struggling forms. As he ran towards them he saw that the combatants were a man and a woman, but he was almost within arm's-length before he realized the truth—that the woman, who appeared to be defending herself from some ruffian's murderous attack, was Philippa.

Percival Blake was a man of immense muscular power. At Oxford he had been famous as an athlete. Without a word he set his teeth and sprang on Philippa's assailant. He dared not strike him—his crushing blow might fall on the wrong person—but in a second the wretch found

his arms wrenched from his victim and half-dislocated, whilst he writhed helplessly in the enraged clergyman's grip.

That ineradicable old Adam, revenge, lurks in every heart, lay or clerical. Whether it is aroused or not is but a question of the strength of the stimulating motive. Surely a man in the Rector's situation may be pardoned for inflicting summary punishment. He did not stop to argue the moral points of the case. His blood boiled in a most unchristianlike manner. Without more ado, he put forth all his great strength and hurled the ruffian from him with prodigious force. The man fell with a dull heavy thud on the ironbound path: moreover, he lay there still and silent; and Percival, whose rage was expended in that effort of strength, felt his heart grow sick from the fear that he had taken human life.

Yet Philippa was his first care. She stood by his side motionless. Her face, in the moonlight, looked livid. Her eyes were dilated and full of horror. She paid no heed to his anxious inquiries, but she clasped her hands round his strong right arm—she

even seemed to caress it, to be trying to estimate its power.

‘Percival,’ she whispered, ‘you are strong—you have killed him.’

‘God forbid!’ said Percival nervously, and stepping to the fallen man. His fears were soon at rest. The fellow breathed heavily, and as he leant over him the Rector detected in that breath a strong smell of ardent spirits. He was glad to find the man a stranger to Chelston—glad he had not been compelled to chastise one of his own flock. Evidently the rogue was a half-drunken tramp; so, greatly relieved, the Rector went back to Philippa.

‘He is dead—you have killed him?’ she said.

‘No—senseless, and, I suspect, half-drunk. Now go home. I will run up to the village and fetch the constable.’

Philippa shivered.

‘Go back and kill him,’ she said in a strange voice.

The Rector looked at her in amazement. Her large eyes gleamed like those of a wild animal.

‘My darling,’ he said, ‘you are upset. If he has robbed or injured you he will pay bitterly for it. Go home, dear Philippa, I will soon be with you.’

Again he felt her shudder. ‘Then all at once her calmness and presence of mind seemed to return.

‘I was upset,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what I said. Percival, we cannot leave the poor wretch lying there.’

The Rector was thinking the same thing.

‘Besides,’ she continued, ‘I am only frightened, not hurt. If you send for the police we shall have to give evidence.’

She spoke wisely. To-morrow they were to start for sunnier lands. Was it worth while delaying their departure for the sake of giving this drunken wretch a taste of the treadmill?

‘I will hear his account of himself,’ said Percival sternly. ‘Wake up!’ he continued, shaking the tramp’s shoulder. All the waking up he seemed capable of was limited to an uneasy grunt.

‘Carry him up to the house—it is not far,’

suggested Philippa. 'Leave him in one of the outhouses until he recovers.'

The Rector could devise no better plan. He threw his fallen foe, who proved to be a slight attenuated creature, over his shoulder and bore him to The Hollies. By Philippa's directions he placed him on the floor of the tool-house. There was no lock to the door, but as the man gave no evidence of an immediate return to consciousness, that mattered little.

'We must try and revive him,' said Percival, rather nervously.

'Come in doors, I will get something.'

He followed her through the French casement of the drawing-room. He was beginning to wonder what had taken her abroad that night, and intended to lecture her on her rashness; but as soon as they entered the room she left him, to fetch the remedies he concluded.

More than ten minutes passed before she returned. The Rector grew uneasy and fidgety. He did not like to think of that senseless tramp outside. He blamed himself for the vengeful force he had put into his

arms. A horrible thing, indeed, if he, a clergyman, had caused a man's death ! Where was Philippa ? He would wait for her no longer. At that moment the door opened, and his bride entered.

Was she mad ? Why at this particular moment did she come to him like this ? Brief as her absence had been, she had found time to make what can only be called a grand toilet. She wore the richest of the many rich dresses which had just been sent from London. There were diamonds in her ears ; diamonds on her white uncovered neck. Her beautiful long round arms were bare, or but partially veiled by thin, delicate lace, and a blood-red flower burned in her black hair. A queen ! No queen with charms to compare with Philippa's has yet graced a throne ! So, with her maddening beauty brightened by all that art can do, she entered the room, and after laying on the table what seemed to be a small bundle of some kind, with a firm quick step she came towards her lover.

A cry of astonishment, of delight, sprang from him. She placed her soft white fingers

on his lips, drew him to a low chair, and motioned him to be seated.

He obeyed. She knelt beside him, her face on a level with his own. A strange sweet perfume emanated from her garments. She wreathed her warm white arms around his neck. She kissed him on his brow, his eyes, his mouth. She drew her face a little away from his, and her dark lustrous eyes gazed into his with wild rapture. He forgot everything save the glorious being who knelt beside him—all save his love for her, her love for him.

He returned her caresses with passion. Her magnificent bosom rose and fell with her quick breathing. His cheek brushed her satiny shoulder. He was in a dream of intoxicating bliss—and yet faintly through it he seemed to hear his mother's words, 'blind unholy passion !'

'Percival, Percival !' murmured the woman. 'You love me ?'

His answer was not given in words.

'I am worth loving,' she whispered. 'Such love is worth a sacrifice. Percival, it is worth more. It is worth a crime !'

Even then he returned her embrace.

‘Percival, listen. Love, kiss me and listen. That man outside—he is my felon husband.’

A sharp fierce cry broke from him. His very lips turned ashen. Yet still he held her to him.

‘They told me he was dead—yet he lives. No matter. Shall our love be wrecked by him?’

A cold sweat broke out all over the man. Yet he turned not from her kiss.

‘Dearest,’ she went on in her flute-like voice. ‘How shall it be? Shall we fly like cowards to another land? I am rich, you know.’

He shivered from head to foot. Some strange instinct made him turn his eyes to the little bundle she had placed on the table. The woman followed his gaze.

‘No,’ she said, with a low, wild laugh. ‘No need to fly. Percival, I would have done it alone, but I knew we should love the better if we sinned together. Come.’

Still holding his hand, she rose. Percival Blake staggered to his feet. He swayed to

and fro like a drunken man, and grasped the table for support. The woman smiled in his face.

‘I am worth it,’ she whispered, as she unwound a large handkerchief and disclosed a stoppered bottle.

‘It will be painless,’ she murmured. ‘It will be like going to sleep. Come, dearest.’

She placed the handkerchief and the bottle in one of his nerveless hands; the other she took in her own. She led him, as one leads a blind man, to the casement. She opened it and the keen fresh wintry air cut into the perfumed atmosphere of the room like a knife.

On the threshold she paused and clung to him in an almost phrensied embrace. The man quivered beneath it. Then, hand in hand, they walked down the garden path. They went swiftly, although the man moved as one in a trance.

She led him to the door of the outhouse. It was open. She looked into his set, drawn face. Her burning fingers tightened round his icy-cold hand.

‘Your hand trembles, sweet love,’ she

said, and therewith took the handkerchief and the bottle from him.

She passed in, and whilst he stood as one spellbound, leaning for support against the doorpost, she began feeling about for the recumbent figure of her husband.

In a minute she was at her lover's side again. She shook his arm fiercely.

'Gone ! He has gone !' she cried. 'Seek him ! He cannot be far off !'

Her words, her touch, seemed to break the spell. With a low cry Percival Blake fell upon his knees, and lifting up his hands, thanked God, whose mercy had willed that he should not be a murderer in very deed as well as in thought. Then the humbled man bowed his head, and sob after sob broke forth.

The woman stood like a statue. A dreary look of hopeless despair settled on her pallid face. Not a muscle moved—not even when Percival Blake rose to his feet and confronted her with eyes full of horror and aversion.

'Temptress ! Fiend !' he whispered. 'I have another prayer to make—that we may never meet again.'

He turned away and went swiftly down the path to the gate by which he had entered. It was but a few steps away. Before he passed through it he cast one look back. Philippa stood as he had left her, tall and erect; her white face, neck and arms gleaming in the wintry moonlight. Then, even then, the old fascination struggled for supremacy—all but mastered him. He took a backward step. Had she made one sign he must have rushed to her side. But she moved neither hand nor foot. By a supreme effort he wrenched himself away, passed through the gate, closed it behind him, and rushed out into the night—anywhere! anywhere!

For two or three hours he wandered about aimlessly; then, scarcely knowing how, found himself in Chelston churchyard. He carried a key which opened the little door of the church. He entered the building and groped his way to the altar steps. He threw himself on the cold stones and lay there in contrition and abasement until five o'clock in the morning. Then, a humbled man, he crept to the Rectory and from sheer exhaustion slept.

Terrified tearful faces met him when he arose. As gently as they could, people told him that an hour ago Mrs. Russell's old servant had found her mistress in her own room, lying on her own bed, dressed as one going to a ball, but quite cold and dead. In a horrified whisper they added it was feared she had committed suicide.

This is the story of that year in a man's life which must be swept away from his memory before he can call himself happy.

THE TRUTH OF IT.

(A SOLICITOR'S STORY.)

I, AND I alone of all living men, know the truth of it ; and although in these pages I slightly alter the details, and change the names of the actors in that sad tragedy, my narration of the facts will be sufficiently accurate to enable anyone who was interested in the case to know to what I refer.

On the morning of—say, the 20th of February, 1870, I reached my office at the usual hour, half-past nine o'clock ; and having perused my letters, summoned my confidential clerk, Mr. Wilson.

‘ Are Mr. Northwick’s papers ready ? ’ I asked, as he entered my room.

‘ Quite ready,’ replied Mr. Wilson ; who,

guessing what I wanted, had brought the documents with him.

He placed them in due order before me ; and after glancing through them, and satisfying myself as to the manner in which they had been prepared, I sat awaiting the appearance of the gentleman for whose signature the papers were ready.

Roland Northwick was not only a good client, but a dear friend of mine. His father before him had borne the same relations to me. As my age lay about midway between the two generations, it had been my fortune to be able to stand on equal terms of friendship with both father and son, so that upon the death of the former, the management of all the legal business connected with the estate continued in my hands as before.

The particular business which now engaged me on Roland's behalf was a very pleasant task to me. He was to be married in a few days, and the match was in every way a suitable and desirable one. Miss Musgrave, the lady of his choice, was well-born, well-dowered, and, moreover, a beautiful and amiable girl. Everything was going well

and smoothly—no hitches in the settlements, no unpleasantnesses with friends on either side. In all human probability the union would bring happiness to the contracting parties.

I was very fond of Roland ; but having known him from a boy, did not hesitate to lecture him on certain things connected with his bachelor life which had, from time to time, come to my knowledge. Yet many of these were only the faults common to young men, and I felt convinced that marriage, and marriage with a girl he really loved, would lead him so far away from the errors of youth that there would be little chance of his returning to them. In truth, I had so high an opinion of the young man, that I would not have hesitated to intrust my own daughter's happiness to his keeping.

He possessed a large property, and as there were several things connected with his estate which I wished settled before his marriage and departure on the long tour he purposed making with his bride, I was very busy with his affairs. This morning he had promised to call at my office, about ten o'clock,

to sign several documents. Later on, I knew he intended to leave town ; so, as the papers were of importance, I felt much annoyed when half-past ten came and he had not yet made his appearance.

I looked over the papers once more, then said to my clerk :

‘ Perhaps Mr. Northwick misunderstood me and thinks I am coming to him. I will take a cab and go to Jermyn Street. If he should call, ask him to wait until I return.’

Roland Northwick lived in chambers in Jermyn Street. His town-house had been let furnished since his father’s death. Now, I was glad to think, the bachelor’s chambers would be given up, and the house occupied by its owner and his young wife as soon as they thought fit to return from their Continental tour.

In a few minutes I alighted at No. —, Jermyn Street. Even as my hand was on the bell, the door was suddenly thrown open, and some one rushing out nearly threw me down. It was Roland’s groom, a respectable man, whom I knew well by sight. His face was blanched with terror, his looks were wild.

He seemed to recognise me, and gasped, 'Oh God! My master! Upstairs!' Then shouting, 'Police! Police!' he rushed madly down the street.

I ran upstairs to Roland's rooms. Outside the bedroom-door crouched a terrified servant-maid, with horror in her eyes. Inside, on the bed, lay Roland Northwick, apparently fast asleep, but in a sleep that would never be broken; for a felon hand had driven a knife deep into his heart!

It was a sight I have never forgotten—a sight I never shall forget. Even after all these years it comes to me in my dreams. Had the murdered man been a total stranger to me, that sight would have haunted me; but as one of my dearest friends lay there, what wonder if the shock almost deprived me of my senses? I was unable for the time to realize the extent of the calamity, and stood gazing at the frightful sight as motionless and almost as powerless as the form stretched in front of me. Then came the rush of feet, and the room filled with people. Policemen hustled me from the bedside, and I heard the words, 'Make way for the doctor!' I

saw a gentleman bend over and examine the corpse ; then he shook his head, and I knew that every lingering hope must be dispelled, and that Roland Northwick lay dead before me. Murdered as he slept—but by whom ?

As I stood by the dressing-table, resting my hand upon it for support, I placed it accidentally upon a morsel of paper. Why, I knew not ; but my fingers closed on it, and, mechanically, I read a few words written there. I am sure at the time I was quite unable to grasp the meaning, but the idea must have come to me somehow that the substance of that letter, or whatever it was, ought not to be exposed to every curious eye. This must have been the reason why I folded the paper and placed it in my pocket.

Shortly afterwards the room was cleared, and the necessary steps taken to sift the dreadful mystery.

The inquest opened the next day, and, after some formal evidence, was adjourned. The doctor deposed that Roland had been killed by a stab with a knife, the point of which had penetrated his heart, so that death must have been instantaneous. The groom

stated that, according to custom, he had called in Jermyn Street for his master's orders at nine o'clock in the morning. He was informed that Mr. Northwick had not yet risen. He had then waited an hour, and, as his master did not make his appearance, had rapped at the bedroom-door without getting any response. At half-past ten he knocked again without success. Shortly afterwards, fearing his master, who was generally an early riser, must be ill, he had ventured to open the door, and so made the ghastly discovery. I stated the little I knew about it, and the inquest was then adjourned for several days. I should mention that, in the doctor's opinion, the murder must have been committed between eight and nine o'clock in the morning.

At the adjourned inquest fresh evidence came forward. Roland's watch and chain were found to be missing. This seemed to show clearly that robbery had been the object of the crime. The knife was produced. It was no assassin's dagger, or weapon a robber would be likely to choose. It was simply a short-bladed, white-handled carving-knife,

such as are designed to carve poultry or game. Use had worn it to a sharp point, and a strong hand had found it an easy task to drive it up to the very handle in poor Roland's breast. It afforded no clue whatever likely to lead to the detection of the wretch who had wielded it. The maker's name had long been worn away, and there must have been millions of similar knives in existence.

The servant at the chambers next gave evidence. At first she roundly stated that by no possibility could anyone have entered the house that morning without her knowledge; but, under pressure, admitted that whilst cleaning the doorsteps, between eight and nine o'clock, she had crossed the road to say a few words to another servant, leaving the door wide open during her absence. How long had she been away? At first she only confessed to a minute; but a series of judicious questions proved her to have been absent from a quarter to half an hour. She was sure no one had entered the house, although she admitted that she had gone into the opposite house to inspect some new

article of finery which her friend had purchased.

This was sufficient. The murderer had waited his time, entered the open and deserted door, probably intent upon robbery; then, having struck the fatal blow, had walked away, unnoticed and unsuspected. It was all clear. The jury returned a verdict of 'Wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.' Government offered the usual reward of a hundred pounds, the heirs of the dead man increased this to five hundred pounds, and Scotland Yard was all agog.

I need not enlarge upon the terrible time I had during those days. The anguish of Miss Musgrave, who insisted upon seeing me and hearing all the harrowing details from my lips. The genuine sorrow I myself felt at the loss of my friend. The utter sadness and dreariness of the funeral, which took the place of the anticipated gay wedding. The inquiries of well-meaning but inquisitive friends. The dreadful sight that was ever before my eyes. All these combined to render me almost unfit for business. Indeed, what I should have done without

the assistance of my confidential clerk, Mr. Wilson, I cannot tell. He rendered me yeoman's service at that time, and I resolved to repay him when an opportunity presented itself.

James Wilson was a man of about thirty-six; gentlemanly, sedate, and trustworthy. He had now been with me some three years, and I placed every confidence in him, and respected his great ability. Originally he had practised on his own account, as a solicitor—somewhere in the West of England, I believe; but being one of those many men who are better off as servants than as masters, he had managed to come to grief over that precipice that yawns before all young solicitors—transactions with speculative builders. After his failure he was strongly recommended to me as fit to fill a responsible post, and I installed him as my principal clerk.

Although a quiet, reticent man, I soon discovered that he was well educated. I knew nothing of him in his private capacity. The few well-meaning advances, in a social way, which I had at first made to him, had

been respectfully but decidedly declined, so that when office hours were over he went his own way. I did not even know where he lived. For all I knew it might be in an attic; but as he was the first to reach the office and the last to leave it, it was no concern of mine. He was an admirable clerk; but at first I was distressed by the melancholy look he always wore—a look as though the world had not been kind to him—but after a time I ceased to notice it; or concluded that, in spite of his unhappy looks, my clerk was as comfortable as the majority of people.

The press of a professional business always seems to come when you are least able to cope with it. It was so at the time when the terrible event happened. Leaving everything connected with Roland Northwick out of the question, I had more work than I could do. Wilson was my right hand, left hand, head and all, at the time. He worked as I believe no clerk ever yet worked, and his pale face told of nights spent in my service. I was afraid the strain would be too great for his rather delicate-looking

frame ; but he assured me his health was good, even if his appearance belied it.

It was well I had with me some one whom I could trust to attend to my work, as, in truth, for some days I could think of little else than Roland Northwick, and wonder, as all the world was wondering, who killed him.

Robbery, said the general public: murdered by a common criminal for the sake of plunder. Robbery, said Scotland Yard, and easily to be traced—the watch and chain will give us the clue. Robbery was Mr. Wilson's opinion when I talked the matter over with him. Robbery, said all poor Roland's friends, save one. I alone knew that robbery had not been the murderer's aim—that if the watch and chain had been taken it was but to throw the hunters on a false scent—that the man who struck that deadly blow, struck it for vengeance, and vengeance only. Not that I knew a man in the world who was Roland Northwick's enemy. Gay, pleasant Roland, with a smile, a kind word, and, when needed, an open purse for everyone. But as I smoothed out that slip of paper,

which I had picked up from his dressing-table, I found these words :

‘My husband knows all. I could not help it. Beware.’

The writing was, of course, a woman’s : this was, doubtless, why in that dreadful moment my confused brain had led me to conceal the words whose meaning at that time I could not grasp. The first thing that struck me, as I examined the paper when alone, was the peculiar character of the writing. It was, evidently, undisguised, but it appeared as if the writer had striven to acquire a certain sort of originality in the formation of her letters. The long letters, being unusually long, gave an elegant, if rather peculiar, look to the handwriting. The paper was a half sheet of creamlaid note—torn off, perhaps, to prevent any name or address appearing—and I noticed that, good as the writing was, it was rather tremulous in places, as though written by an aged woman, or by one in great haste, or suffering from some powerful emotion. The paper had been twisted into a knot, and then addressed, so there was no enve-

lope for it, and the note, from the outside appearance, must have been delivered by hand.

As I sat with that paper in front of me, I knew for certain that the man who had slain Roland Northwick in his sleep was the husband of the woman who had penned those words of warning. Roland had lived as many another man lives, taking his pleasure where he found it, and counting not the cost. His life, I feared, had been shed to appease the vengeance of an injured husband. He was no libertine ; but he was young, and few young men can resist temptation when it assails them in the shape of a fair woman.

I may have been wrong—I was wrong in the course I took, but I was fully resolved that the letter which I alone had seen should not become public property—that it should not serve as a theme for the newspapers to enlarge upon and to point out in unctuous paragraphs what the wages of sin, etc., must be. Poor Roland's murder had rang through England, and the mind of the public had been greatly stirred by it. It was unpre-

cedented that a man should be killed in broad daylight, in the centre of a populous neighbourhood, and that the assassin should escape scot-free. Already the papers had begun to sneer at the incompetency of the detectives, and to hint that a change in the present system was desirable. Moreover, I was anxious that no word of what I suspected should reach Miss Musgrave's ears: nothing that should lead her to think that aught save robbery had been the murderer's object. So I determined to keep the matter secret until the inquest was over. Then I sent for the detective in charge of the case. I was as eager as anyone that the guilty should be brought to justice, so lost no time in endeavouring to put the police on the right scent.

‘Mr. Sharpe,’ I said, ‘you are doing all that can be done, I hope.’

‘Everything, sir; and I hoped to have caught him before this. But, strange to say, we can find no trace of the stolen property. I am afraid it's in the melting-pot.’

‘Before you go any further,’ I said, ‘I want you to disabuse your mind of the idea

that the murder was committed for the sake of plunder.'

The detective smiled, as much as to say, 'Everyone thinks he knows better than we do.'

'If I wanted to earn this large reward,' I continued, 'I should ascertain all about Mr. Northwick's habits—what acquaintances he had of which his friends knew nothing—any ties he might have formed. In fact, I will be candid with you, Mr. Sharpe—I know that a day or two before he died my poor friend received a letter warning him to beware of some woman's husband. I can tell you no more than this, but it ought to be enough.'

'You should have said so before the coroner, sir.'

'Yes—and given the guilty man full warning. Now he suspects nothing, and should easily be discovered.'

This reasoning of mine was so cogent that Mr. Sharpe was forced to agree with it. I could give him no more information, so he departed, certain of claiming the reward in a week's time. I heard no more for some days,

save the usual statement that the police had a clue and were following it.

When I saw the detective again he was quite crestfallen.

‘I have made every inquiry,’ he said, ‘but I cannot find a word of scandal against Mr. Northwick. I think, sir, you are making a mistake.’

‘I am not,’ I replied. ‘The blow was struck in revenge, and the man who struck it is probably in London now.’

But it was no use. The reward was never claimed, and poor Roland’s murder went to swell the already long list of undiscovered and unavenged crimes. After a while a still more appalling tragedy drove it from the public mind, and only those closely interested continued to think of it. I had done all I could, so I locked the mysterious slip of paper in my secretaire, wondering whether fate or chance would some day reveal the writer’s name to me. It appeared to me that the whole affair had been terribly mismanaged; as with such information as I had been able to give Sharpe, suspicion, at least, should have fallen on some one. However closely

poor Roland might have veiled any indiscretion of his, surely the skill of Scotland Yard should have laid it bare. There must have been meetings—there must have been servants who carried letters or messages—there must have been some persons who could throw light on the affair ; and yet not the slightest trace of the intrigue which I suspected could Inspector Sharpe's skill discover. I must confess that, as I placed the paper in a safe drawer, I was inclined to agree with the newspapers that a change was needful in our detective arrangements.

Five years passed by. The grass had grown long on Roland Northwick's grave—his memory had vanished from all but a few hearts. If his name were casually mentioned, men would say : ' Ah, yes, Roland Northwick ! He committed suicide, or was killed, or something—I forget now what it was.' Everybody save myself had given up the hope of seeing his murderer hanged, but I had a conviction that the piece of paper lying in my desk would some day or another bring the guilty man to justice.

The five years had been very uneventful to me. I was growing greyer and richer, and was beginning to look forward to taking life somewhat easier ; but when a man is in the swim of a large professional business, he finds great difficulty in reaching the shores of retirement. During these five years I had once more drawn up settlements for Miss Musgrave. Time had healed her wounds, and she had now been married about twelve-months. I did not blame her for forgetting—if she did forget. With the young, no sorrow can be eternal. She had mourned Roland long and truly, and I was glad that her bright eyes were not destined to be always saddened with the memory of the man she loved first.

My trusted clerk, Mr. James Wilson, was still with me. He was grave, reserved, and correct as ever. Perhaps even more pale, unhappy, and delicate in appearance ; but he never complained of his health, and as he worked early and late to my benefit, I could only suppose his constitution was better than it looked. I never saw such a man to work : certainly no man not working for himself.

No sooner was one thing finished than another was commenced ; and I may safely say that, during those five years, except on business, he had not been absent from his desk for an hour. He reminded me of a machine, wound up and sent into the world to work with unerring accuracy until the wheels and the spring at last broke down.

Once or twice I had raised his salary. He had accepted the increase with quiet, but not effusive thanks, as one who knew he had fully earned it. As he was now so important to me in my business, and as he knew my clients almost as well as I knew them myself, I had once more gone out of my way to endeavour to create some sort of friendship in private life between us. I invited him—indeed, pressed him—to come home and spend a Sunday with me at Richmond. He declined in his usual polite way ; and upon my telling him my reason for urging it was that I thought men who spent so many hours in business together should not be entire strangers out of the office bounds, he said :

‘ You must really excuse me, Mr. Mait-

land. I have visited no one for years. I am never happy in company. Indeed, I dare say by this time you have noticed that I have peculiarities of my own, and am quite unfitted for society.'

I was more annoyed at this rebuff than I cared to say, and resolved that, for the future, he should go his own way, live his own life, and I would trouble no more about it.

Yet at the time of which I now write—five years after Northwick's murder—I began to realize the fact that I was not quite so young as I was; so, after much consideration, and, perhaps, not altogether heedless of what appeared just, I decided that the hour had come to offer Wilson a partnership. He had now been with me eight years. His conduct and general bearing had been irreproachable. He was a capital lawyer. His address was good. My clients liked him. His transactions were all strictly honourable. I felt I should be happier with the business in the hands of a man whom I so thoroughly knew and trusted, than were I to take as a partner one unproved—al-

though the latter course might be more advantageous in a pecuniary sense.

I told Wilson of my good intentions towards himself. His pale face flushed, and, for once, I saw him manifest signs of real feeling—so much so, that I began to hope, that, standing on terms of equality, we might be more companionable. Judge my surprise when he said :

‘I am really much obliged to you, Mr. Maitland—deeply grateful for this proof of confidence—but I regret to say I must decline your offer.’

‘Decline it, Mr. Wilson ! You must be mad.’

‘Perhaps I am — perhaps I am philosophical—I told you I was peculiar. I am, although you won’t believe it, a restless man, and I know if I were bound in partnership with you I should want to leave you before three months were over. Now that I can quit you at any time I choose, I stay on, and, probably, shall continue to do so if you wish to keep me.’

The man was an unsatisfactory riddle ; but I did not like to see him throwing

away his chances in this fashion, so I said :

‘ But, Wilson, have you no belongings—no family dependent upon you ?’

‘ I have no near relatives,’ he replied.

‘ Why don’t you get married ? You would find life a great deal happier with a nice pleasant wife to look after you.’

‘ I shall never get married—women and I don’t agree.’

‘ Then you are quite determined to refuse my offer ?’

‘ Quite, Mr. Maitland. Thanks to your generosity, I have a larger income than I want, and am free from all business anxiety : so I could not be better off. But will you allow me to shake your hand and thank you, once and for all, for your invariable kindness to me ?’

I said no more, but held out my hand. Wilson grasped it, and then returned to his desk and his drafts as calmly as though nothing unusual had happened, and he had not deliberately thrown away the chance of a lifetime.

Some months after this conversation with

my extraordinary clerk, Sir William Jarvis, an old client of mine, died. I was summoned to attend his funeral, and to read the will afterwards. The day before I went down to his country-house, I thought it would be as well if I looked through the draft of his will, in order to be familiar with its provisions. His box was brought in, and I soon put my hand upon the document I wanted. It was dated in 1867—the year Wilson came to me—and the draft was in my clerk's handwriting. It was a voluminous document, consisting of a good many sheets of paper, joined together at the corner. To the front page was affixed a slip of white paper, bearing sundry memoranda—also in Wilson's handwriting—suggesting, most likely, a few alterations to be made if I approved of them.

As I bent this piece of paper back, to read the words it concealed, I saw writing on the other side of it, and my heart stood still as I knew that the writing was identical with the writing of those words which had been stamped upon my brain since the day of Roland Northwick's death.

With trembling hands I detached the slip of paper, opened my secretaire, and laid it side by side with the note of warning. I had been deceived by no fancied resemblance; the writing was the same, and so peculiar was the penmanship that I felt convinced that no chance could have produced these two specimens from different persons. True, the writing on the newly found paper was better and firmer than that on the other; but I compared letter with letter and found them exactly alike in their formation. The hand that wrote one wrote the other; and as the two slips of paper lay before me I felt that the murderer of Roland Northwick had had his day. Then, with professional instinct, I sat down to think calmly over my discovery. The paper which I had so unexpectedly found contained what appeared to be a portion of Byron's 'When we two parted.' Probably the writer was an admirer of the poet, and had transcribed it for her own pleasure. The paper had been torn, lengthways, down the centre; so that only the first halves of the lines were left. But this was more than enough—I could have

sworn to the identity of the writing had only two letters appeared.

Now came the difficulty. How could I connect the two papers? What theory could I form? Here, through an extraordinary chance, was the clue starting from my very office. Here it had been lying for five years. Now that it was within my hands, whither would it lead? Could it be possible that Wilson was in any way mixed up in the affair? I shuddered at the thought, and felt inclined to dismiss it as preposterous. At first I even contemplated asking him point-blank whose writing it might be on the back of the slip of paper he had used; but recognising the necessity for extreme caution, I decided not to do so. I endeavoured to throw my memory back to the time when Sir William's will was made. Looking through my old diaries, I found that about that date we had a press of business in hand; but I could recollect nothing more than taking Sir William's instructions, and, afterwards, seeing him execute the will. I felt I must endeavour to get some more information before I took any decisive steps;

so, pinning the two slips of paper together, I placed them in my pocket book and sent for Mr. Wilson. I was quite composed when he entered, and, running over the sheets of the draft, asked :

‘Do you remember the circumstances under which you drew this up? I ask, as there are several little things in it I should have worded differently.’

Wilson took the paper in his hand, looked at the date and replied :

‘It was one of the first things I did for you, before I had quite caught your style. I remember, as we were very busy, I drafted it at home, and you altered a good deal of it before it was fair copied.’

Then this fact was pretty well established ; the paper, whoever wrote it, came from Wilson’s house. I saw clearly that my first proceeding must be to ascertain everything I could respecting his antecedents and private life. I looked up my letters of 1867, and found from them that Wilson had been recommended to me by Forbes and Thwaites of Bristol, a firm of high standing. Having ascertained this much, I went in search of a

private inquiry agent. I hated the idea of having to spy on one of my household, as it were, but the serious nature of the case gave me no option.

‘Can you attend to a bit of business for me?’ I said. ‘A few private inquiries I want made.’

‘Certainly, sir,’ replied the agent, producing his note-book; ‘we are rather slack just now.’

‘I want you to go to Bristol to-night. Inquire there of Messrs. Forbes and Thwaites, solicitors, from what part of the world James Wilson came. He was bankrupt in 1866, I believe, and they were concerned.’

The heads of my instructions were rapidly jotted down.

‘Then you will go to the place at which he originally lived, and find out all you can about him. His connections, private life, etc.’

The agent nodded.

‘Then you will ascertain his private address in London, and get all particulars you can of his history since he came to town. As soon

as you know enough, write me, and I will call for your report.'

'Case of defalcation, I suppose?' said the man, closing his note-book.

'Something of the sort,' I replied, and wished him good-morning.

I did not choose to take anyone into my confidence this time. I would get all the links together before I put the chain into other hands.

In five days' time the agent sent me word that his report was ready. I had been anxiously awaiting it, so hastened to hear what he had discovered.

There was a good deal in it that was of no consequence whatever; but the detective had done his duty in getting the fullest information. Sifting out all extraneous matter, I learnt as follows.

James Wilson was of respectable family. He had been well educated, then articled to a firm of solicitors. Afterwards he set up in practice at a rising watering-place on the Bristol Channel, where, as I have already stated, he became involved in some unfortunate building transactions, failing in conse-

quence. He had married, whilst in practice, the daughter of a well-to-do retired tradesman ; but as several members of his wife's family lost considerable sums of money by his failure, they became completely estranged. Wilson came to London in 1867, taking lodgings in Chelsea. His wife died on February 22nd, 1870. They were apparently a happy and much attached couple. They had no children, and since her death Wilson had continued to occupy the same rooms.

‘And,’ added my informant, with a lurking smile, ‘I find that since he has been in London he has held the post of confidential clerk to Mr. Maitland, solicitor, of Bedford Row.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mr. Maitland. ‘I am much obliged to you. It has been painful to me to institute these inquiries, but I was bound to set my mind at rest about Mr. Wilson.’

Although I had gained little direct evidence, my suspicions gathered strength. Impossible as the idea seemed, the testimony of the handwriting proclaimed that James

Wilson must in some way be connected with the perpetrator of the foul crime. At least, he would be able to identify the writer of the message. My agent had ascertained that his wife had died on February 22nd, 1870—two days after the blow was struck. As I thought the matter over, the fact of Wilson not having mentioned his wife's death at the time, and his misleading words to me on a recent occasion, which had made me conclude he was unmarried, tended to make it appear possible that the writer of that warning note was Mrs. Wilson herself. Even the tremulous nature of the handwriting would be accounted for, as she must have been at that moment lying on her death-bed. How Roland Northwick became entangled with James Wilson's wife was a matter of little consequence now. Detective skill must unravel all that, and no doubt drag a painful scandal to light. For me, at present, it was sufficient to know that could I prove the writer of those two papers lying in my pocket to be James Wilson's wife, I had enough ground to justify his arrest as the murderer.

This identification must be my first task.

I determined to make no delay. The thought that for years I had been in daily contact and communication with the cold-blooded murderer of one of my dearest friends was to me horrible. With this dreadful suspicion hanging over him, I felt it almost impossible to breathe the same air with Wilson, much less to transact my usual business matters with him. I felt that I might betray myself in his presence, and, with the acute suspicion which such a crime must engender, he would guess what was passing through my mind, and fly from justice. I left the office, stating that I should not return that day, and the next morning sent Wilson a letter, saying that an urgent private matter had called me into the country. The link that joined the two others I must have before proceeding any further. I knew the name of the church in which Wilson had been married ; the object of my journey was to visit it. I inspected the register of marriages, and, knowing the date of the ceremony, had little difficulty in lighting upon the signatures of James Wilson and Adelaide Fletcher. The resemblance in the writing here was even closer to the warning message than that of the

lines of poetry I had so fortunately found. Perhaps, from the emotion natural to a young girl when signing her maiden name for the last time, the strokes were tremulous, even as from another cause they were tremulous in those fatal words that now lay side-by-side with the bride's signature—'My husband knows all. I could not help it. Beware!'

With all my lingering doubts—with all the hopes I cherished as to Wilson's innocence dispelled, I hastened back to town, nerving myself to perform a harrowing duty the next day—the duty of denouncing as the murderer of Roland Northwick the man who for eight years had been my constant companion and trusted associate in business.

Late as the hour was when I reached Paddington, I drove straight to Inspector Sharpe's house. Accustomed to surprises at all hours, that astute gentleman expressed no astonishment at seeing me, but awaited patiently any communication I had to make for his benefit. Yet for once, at least, in the course of his checkered career I believe he was taken aback.

'If you will be at my office at eleven

o'clock precisely to-morrow morning, I will point out to you the man who murdered Roland Northwick.'

The inspector started.

'Tell me where to find him,' he said, 'and the handcuffs shall be on his wrists to-night.'

I hesitated. Something restrained me from telling him to whom my suspicions pointed. It was not mercy; but I wished to give Wilson one chance of explaining the thing which had led me to accuse him of the crime.

'No,' I replied. 'I cannot even tell you his name at this moment. I must manage matters in my own way. He will come to my office to-morrow, utterly unsuspecting. I will then point him out to you, and you can take the proper course.'

Inspector Sharpe promised obedience to my instructions, so I left him to dream, no doubt, of the reward he might claim to-morrow.

Tired as I was with the day's work, I slept but little that night. I was drawing mental pictures of the painful proceeding of to-mor-

row. Then, between waking and sleeping, a wild thought took possession of me. I fancied that from some reason or another Wilson had divined my suspicions, and that on the morrow he would be absent. So strongly did this idea impress me, that I actually rose, determined to go to the detective at once, reveal all I knew, and let the arrest be made immediately, so that justice should not be defeated. Then, as my senses returned to me, I saw how utterly impossible it was that Wilson could suspect anything, and, lying down once more, I resolved to let matters follow in the train I had designed.

Still, it was not without relief that I saw, upon entering my office in the morning, my confidential clerk at his usual post. He saluted me with his invariable calm politeness. For the life of me, I could not return that greeting; but, averting my face, hurried into my own room, the entrance to which lay through his. I opened my letters in a mechanical way, in the present excited state of my mind giving little heed to their contents. I could think only of one thing—was I not wrong, after all? Could that quiet,

self-possessed, gentle-spoken man, now sitting within a few feet of me, be guilty of one of the foulest and most dastardly crimes ever perpetrated? I began now almost to wish that my fear of the preceding night had been well founded, and his flight had given me assurance of his guilt.

In a few minutes the door of my office opened and Wilson entered. He had a number of papers in his hand, and running them through, said :

‘If you are at liberty now, Mr. Maitland, there are several things about which I should like to consult you.’

I shuddered as he spoke ; but as he stood there with his impassible exterior—his mind, evidently, bent only on business—it seemed absurd to suppose that this man was the being who, with hellish vengeance in his heart, crept up the staircase to Roland’s bedroom ; that those white fingers, holding now a harmless pen, were the same which closed round the handle of the knife that pierced my poor friend’s bosom.

But the time for hesitation and uncertainty was gone by. In an hour Sharpe would be

here, eager for his prey ; and until he came I determined that Mr. James Wilson should not be a moment out of my sight.

I rose and walked to the office door, locked it, and placed the key in my pocket. Then I resumed my seat, and motioned Wilson to one near me. My unusual proceedings, I fancied, troubled him—he turned a shade paler if that were possible, but he said nothing.

Many a time afterwards, in cold blood, I have wondered at my folly at thus, of my own free will, cooping myself up with a man whom I suspected to be a murderer ; a man who might have made preparations against a surprise of this nature, and to whom my life might have been as nothing. But I was the stronger, although the older, man of the two. Wilson, although tall, was slim, almost to thinness, and I was certain that in a hand-to-hand struggle I could overpower him. I felt disgust and horror at my companion, but not fear. He looked at me inquiringly.

‘ Mr. Wilson,’ I said, ‘ some time ago you led me to understand you were unmarried. I have since ascertained that your wife died in February, 1870.’

Wilson, whose acuteness told him that I did not make this assertion with the primary object of reproaching him for concealing the true state of his domestic affairs from me, made a simple gesture of assent.

‘I find,’ I continued, ‘that your wife died on the 22nd of February, 1870—two days after the murder of Roland Northwick.’

As I spoke the last words he knew what was coming—I could see it in the man’s face.

‘And,’ I concluded, ‘from certain facts which have come to my knowledge, I have decided that you, even if you did not strike the blow yourself, must know the murderer.’

Wilson rose. He was perfectly calm, and speaking in his usual quiet voice, said :

‘Are you mad, Mr. Maitland, to make such an accusation—against me, of all men in the world? Without troubling to deny it, I ask you, as a lawyer and man of business, what possible motive could I have had for committing such a crime?’

‘The day before he was killed, Roland Northwick received a letter of warning from a woman—a woman whose husband he had doubtless wronged. Till a few days ago

her name was unknown. Now, from the similarity of the curious writing to that of another specimen which I have ascertained was written by your wife, I know that the warning was sent by her. James Wilson, you wretched murderer! Your hour has come! I have already denounced you, and in a short time the officers will be here.'

Wilson sat silent for some time. I was on the alert, expecting that my accusation would be the signal for an attempt to escape. But nothing seemed farther from his thoughts. After a while he raised his eyes to mine, and said quietly,

'Your knowledge of common law cannot be very great, Mr. Maitland, if you think that any English jury will convict a man upon the fancied resemblance between two scraps of writing. But your deductions are more correct than your law—I did kill Roland Northwick.'

The audacity of this full confession, spoken as if he were mentioning an incident in his career of little moment, so surprised me that I could only stare at him and ejaculate:

‘Villain ! Ruffian !’

‘Yes,’ continued this strange man, ‘I killed him ; and I will tell you why I killed him—that is, if you care to listen to the tale, and if there is time before the warrant arrives.’

‘The information will be sworn at eleven o’clock,’ I stammered ; marvelling at his extraordinary composure, and by it compelled to give him an answer to his question. ‘Till then,’ I added, ‘I shall not lose sight of you for an instant.’

He smiled faintly, almost contemptuously. He might really have been an uninterested spectator of the scene. But he began to speak, and, in a moment, his whole manner changed. He was transfigured, and I knew that at last I was face to face with the true man. His brows contracted, his deep-set eyes burned with fierce light, his cheek flushed, and the veins on his forehead stood out with emotion. His speech was rapid, and his language eloquent. His gesticulation was striking ; his thin, lithe fingers clasped each other, or were extended to give due emphasis to his powerful words ;

and as I watched his action and listened to his words, I comprehended that under that cold surface of reserve, under that well-fitting mask of suave politeness, beat a heart shaken by the strongest passions and capable of the deepest feeling. As I stood face to face with him, I could scarcely realize that this was the same man whom I had seen daily for eight years.

‘I will be brief, Mr. Maitland,’ he said ; ‘I killed Roland Northwick because he seduced my wife. I had loved her as a boy—I loved her and married her as a man. If I had no wealth to give, I gave her such love as man has never yet given woman. I believed her to be the most pure, as well as the most beautiful, of women. To me she was simply my life. Every hope, every thought of mine was for her happiness. Oh, how I loved that woman ! loved her, worshipped her, trusted her, slaved for her ! And that night when, stricken with the illness which she knew would be fatal, when I hung over her pillow and tended her with loving hands, she whispered that cursed confession to me, my

life was at an end for ever. As, trembling at death, and the judgment she feared after that death, she sobbed out her shame to me, praying for my forgiveness, so that the God whom she dreaded might perhaps forgive her, then I laid my lips beside her ear and whispered:

“When I have killed him, I will forgive you. Not till then.”

‘Had you ever loved a woman as I loved her, you would pity even whilst condemning me for what you call the crime. I cared not which was to blame, the man or the woman; but I said, “That man shall die.” The details of their intrigue were of little interest. They had first met outside this very office, where she would frequently wait to accompany me home. How their acquaintance ripened, or what arts he used, I know not. She was a beautiful woman, and he was a gallant, handsome young man. Yet the day has been when I could have shown as gay and gallant a front as Mr. Roland Northwick! He had made an end of my life, and his own should pay forfeit.

‘The next morning I was outside his house,

but found no means of gaining an entrance. I knew all his habits well, and several times had been to his rooms on business.

“‘To-morrow,” I whispered to my wife, who now lay almost speechless and insensible—and “to-morrow” it was! You know the rest.

‘I reached home in the evening, and leaning over my dying wife, whispered :

“‘He is dead—I forgive you now.”

‘She spoke no more. The next day she died, and that look of horror which settled on her face when I whispered those words of forgiveness never left it.’

He was silent.

‘You wretched man!’ I cried. ‘Do you feel no remorse?’

‘I feel no remorse. My life became a blank. Love passed out of it with my wife’s death. Hate left it when I drove that knife through her seducer’s heart. Since then I have cared nothing for life—nothing for death.’

‘But the hereafter—beyond death!’ I cried, appalled by such callousness.

Wilson had again seated himself, and

resumed his usual mask. His recent excitement had vanished, and left no trace. His ordinary quiet smile passed over his features.

‘Intellectual men with my views,’ he said, ‘trouble little about the future, and fear it less.’

In spite of my horror and disgust, I could not help feeling a certain amount of curiosity.

‘But how could you avoid detection?’ I asked.

‘Simply by not trying to escape it. I cared little whether I was discovered or not. Some strange instinct induced me to take the watch and chain, which now lie a shapeless mass, buried in one corner of the cellar beneath this house. I only wanted access to the room. Having done what I had resolved to do, it mattered little whether I came out again or not. By some strange chance no one saw me; so I walked down the stairs and reached the office as usual. My glove was on my hand when I struck the blow. It was stained with blood, so I burnt it. That was all. Had I been arrested that day—as, indeed, I fully expected to

have been—I should have made no defence; paying the penalty of my act as carelessly as I shall now.'

'But how could you meet me? How could you go about your business as usual, with this awful crime on your conscience?'

'I tell you, Mr. Maitland, I neither felt nor feel remorse, regret, or even wish to evade justice. My life, as I understand life, ended. I simply waited, never doubting but all would some day be known.'

I felt it was too horrible to hear this man discussing his crime, and approaching shameful end as coolly as though he were speaking of some client's ordinary business matters.

'Now, you see, Mr. Maitland,' he continued, 'why I refused your kind offer of a partnership. It will matter very little, your clerk being arrested for murder; but had I been your partner it would not have improved the standing of the firm.'

I thanked him mentally for his consideration, but said nothing. I was determined to speak no more. It was too painful, and I longed for Sharpe to arrive and terminate the interview.

Wilson, as though reading my thoughts, glanced at his watch.

‘I see that my time is short,’ he said. ‘I have one letter I wish to write before the handcuffs are on my wrists. Would it be asking too great a favour if I requested you to leave me alone for a few minutes?’

I told him he was at liberty to write what he liked; but I should not quit him. He slightly shrugged his shoulders, and saying, ‘As you will,’ took a sheet of paper and commenced writing.

His letter was a very short one. He placed it in an envelope, laying it on the table with the address downwards.

The minutes stole on. Surely it must now be eleven o’clock. I would have looked at my watch, but a kind of feeling of delicacy restrained me. I waited some little time longer and then glanced at Wilson. I was sitting nearest the door, with the idea of cutting off any attempted escape. Wilson was in my usual seat at the table, which was littered with letters and legal documents. This table, I should add, was between us. As he finished his letter he took up a brief.

and commenced perusing it. Even at this awful moment he appeared to be interested only in the work which he had done so well for so many years. His left hand held the sheet he was perusing near his eyes; the remainder of the document hung down, hiding his right hand as well as the greater portion of his body. As I sat waiting until the hour sounded from the neighbouring church towers, and wondering at the self-command displayed by the remorseless murderer, he looked across and met my gaze. There was an expression in his eyes which I had never before noticed there.

‘I have been thinking, Mr. Maitland,’ he said, in his gentle voice, ‘that, after all, I should like to escape the gallows. As there are only two ways of escaping—one over your body, and another—I choose that other one.’

And before I could comprehend the hidden meaning of his words I heard the loud report of a pistol, and James Wilson fell forward across my office-table, deluging it and all it held with his heart’s blood.

Before I could call for assistance, Inspector Sharpe, who was waiting outside, burst open

the door and rushed to the dying man. He sighed once, and then we knew that all was over with him.

The letter he had just penned was addressed to me. It contained only these words :

‘ The reason of my rash act is extensive defalcations, which, sooner or later, you must discover.’

At the inquest held on my ill-fated clerk I had to appear. I stated, truthfully enough, that our conversation that morning had been upon a matter of business which he had conducted much to my dissatisfaction. The letter which I produced apparently explained all. The verdict was—‘ Suicide whilst in an unsound state of mind.’ I never looked for any defalcations, well knowing that none would be found. The detective, no doubt, formed his own conclusions as to the identity of the man he came to arrest, for he asked me nothing more about him ; but I—and I only—knew the whole truth why Roland Northwick was murdered, and why James Wilson shot himself in my office. And the truth is the narrative above written.

A SPECULATIVE SPIRIT.

Now, to understand the solemnity of this story, you must believe that Hopkins is a man entirely without imagination—Frank Blair and I decided that when we first made his acquaintance, years ago, and have never changed our opinion. We were then two young geniuses who hoped to soar to fame on the wings of art—the most imaginative art of all, figure painting; and we knew and were glad to hail imagination wherever we saw it. Besides, as Blair truly remarked, Hopkins is a man whose vocation it is to make money, somehow, on the Stock Exchange; so one might as well look for imagination in a model engaged at a shilling an hour. Then, again, the man's face is sufficient to assure you that he is not blessed with any such

quality. It is a large face, rather flabby and sprinkled with freckles; the nose is short and thick, and lip, chin, and cheeks quite destitute of hair. Hopkins's body, too, is almost inclined to corpulence; he dresses in a commonplace manner, his fingers are short and thick; so I think we may safely settle, to start with, that Hopkins is a very ordinary man, and has no imagination.

I scarcely remember how we first foregathered with Hopkins. He was hardly the man we should have chosen for an intimate friend; yet, at one time, we saw a good deal of him. In those jolly old days Frank and I lodged in modest rooms together and shared a studio.

I think Mr. Levi Solomon, the picture-dealer, to whom when hardly pressed we would sell a picture or two, brought him to us as a gentleman who desired a personal interview. It was, of course, against Solomon's secret wishes that the introduction took place, as the worthy Israelite did not approve of direct transactions between artist and collector; but Hopkins was doubtless a good customer and stood firm, so one day

Solomon conducted him to our studio. We must have been in funds at that moment, for I remember we treated poor Solomon rather cavalierly; and as for Hopkins, we looked upon him as a being from a lower sphere—a Philistine; a creature whose presence in the world could only be tolerated from the stern necessity that an artist must sell his pictures to some one in order to live. Our ideas of the grandeur and importance of the true mission of art were very lofty in those days, especially if we happened to have a few pounds in our pockets. Hopkins to us was one of a class of men who buy young artists' pictures solely with a view of realizing hundreds per cent. on the investments when fame comes to the painter.

However, whether from mercenary inclinations, or for the many good qualities that adorned us, Hopkins took a great fancy to us, and sought our society from that day. Of course he had the usual commercial faults, and not a few defects of education; but he had a great and proper reverence for genius, and delighted to do it homage—at least, so we understood the meaning of those little

dinners he gave us, at his own chambers and various other places. As artists, after all, are but mortal, and, when young and struggling, not too highly fed, we accepted Hopkins's attentions in the spirit in which we fancied they were meant, and, after a bit, tolerated him ; indeed, even began to think he was a desirable acquaintance—so, moved by a feeling of gratitude for his civilities, only doubled the market-price of the pictures we could at times induce him to buy.

We enjoyed the dinners he gave us very much, but I am sure Hopkins enjoyed himself more when we were kind enough to condescend to invite him to spend an evening at our lodgings. He gave us Lafite and choice cigars ; we only placed pipes and whisky upon the table ; but then, as he said, our rooms, if humble, were the abode of art, which he honoured. Altogether Hopkins was not a bad sort, and those were merry old times.

If Hopkins did not himself take a leading part in the conversation during these evening entertainments, he was, at least, a capital listener ; and, somehow, when Frank Blair

and I, as was our wont, got into lively discussions on things in general, and art in particular, we had contracted the habit of addressing our remarks to our guest, much in the same way that honourable members address their words to the Speaker. Hopkins would sit in the crazy armchair and listen with a sort of stolid impartiality, but rarely ventured to make a remark on his own account. Occasionally during our talk I fancied his face would wear an expression of content, but should not like to be rash enough to assert even that much. He would sit smoking his pipe or cigar, but the nearest approach he made to entering into the discussion was by giving an occasional grunt, which might be either of approbation or condemnation, as those who heard chose to construe it. Sometimes, for want of better amusement, Frank and I would join our forces together and chaff our friend unmercifully. He bore our sallies of wit very well, and seemed to like us none the worse that we made fun at his expense. Yet there was little fun in it, after all; and we decided that, except to keep our hands in, it was

scarcely worth while to waste our fine passes on a man who was so unresisting and knew so little of fence. But one unlucky evening he brought upon himself a regular onslaught.

We had been dilating upon the charms of an artist's life, and asserting its moral superiority to that of any trade, when our friend sighed deeply and said :

‘ Sometimes, do you know, I think had I learnt to draw when a boy, I might have done something in your line. But now I am afraid it is too late.’

This idea was so presumptuous that we felt it demanded instant and severe punishment, so Frank said gently :

‘ My dear fellow, you draw some things very nicely now, even without an artist's education—cheques, for instance.’

I followed more severely :

‘ Mr. Hopkins, allow me to warn you against falling into the error of that general public which you so well represent, of thinking that the execution alone makes the artist. An artist, as I understand the word, must have many qualities besides manual

dexterity. He must have, in addition, many of the gifts of the poet, and amongst them that greatest gift of all, imagination. Now you, my dear sir, I am afraid are not very great at that.'

Poor Hopkins said nothing, evidently convinced by Frank's sarcasm and my ponderous arguments that his case was a hopeless one.

'Do you ever dream?' asked Frank.

'Not very often,' replied Hopkins, 'only after curried lobster or crab, or something of that sort. I am a very sound sleeper.'

'Then you see, if you can't dream without the assistance of indigestible food, you can't imagine, and I, with every wish to encourage incipient talent, should advise you not to adopt the profession of an artist.'

'Well, well,' said Hopkins, 'let us say no more about it,' and he sighed again.

But we were not inclined to let him off so easily, and went on in the same vein till we were weary, and tossed him and his aspirations about between us like a ball. We treated him very badly, and he must have been the best-tempered or the thickest-

skinned of men to have stood it without showing anger.

Tired at last of baiting our imperturbable friend, we turned to other topics.

‘Seen Jones’s new picture?’ asked Frank.

‘Yes. Don’t care much for it,’ I replied; ‘men shouldn’t try to paint old subjects unless they can treat them in a new manner.’

‘Well, it must be hard to strike out a new line with Hamlet and the ghost. I never tried to paint a ghost, so I don’t know what I should make of it.’

‘I shall wait till I see one, and then offer it handsome terms for a few sittings. I think there is something to be done with ghosts, but they must be of an original kind, not conventional, like Jones’s.’

‘Hang it, no! They are always the same; thinly painted, with something placed conveniently behind them to show their transparency. I wouldn’t care to paint a ghost of that sort, people only laugh at them; but I should like to put that creepy sensation on canvas—that feeling that something uncanny is about.’

‘Well, when some one does see a ghost, we may get the correct thing ; not till then.’

‘Ghosts ain’t visible,’ said Hopkins solemnly ; ‘but, for all that, there are ghosts.’

A remark like this from Hopkins was an event not lightly to be passed over, so we cried in a breath :

‘What do you know about ghosts ? Ever troubled with them ?’

He took his pipe from his lips and said quietly :

‘If you young fellows won’t laugh too much, I don’t mind telling you.’

We promised the gravity of Solon, and Frank winked at me in so barefaced a manner, that anybody but our unobservant friend would have seen it and at once declined speaking. However, no mischief was done, for in deep accents he began :

‘You remember——’

‘Stop a bit,’ I said ; ‘I can tell from the way the story opens it is going to be something awful. Let us fill the glasses first.’

We did so.

‘Now fire away, old fellow, and don’t please, embellish your truthful tale with too many flowers of fancy.’

Hopkins paused a little.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘you won’t mention this to anybody, as I should not like the people on the Stock Exchange to hear of it. They chaff so.’

We vowed that wild horses should not rend the terrible revelation from our bosoms.

Hopkins began again :

‘You remember my late partner, poor old Bobbett?’

‘Never even heard of him,’ interrupted Blair.

‘Ah, to be sure. Before your time. Well, our firm was—indeed, is now—Bobbett, Hopkins, and Company.’

‘What business?’ I asked, with the air of a cross-examining counsel.

‘Stock - jobbers. Office,—Capel Court, said Hopkins with a return to his usual brevity.

‘Excuse my interrupting your interesting tale,’ said Frank, ‘but what is a stock-jobber? Something eminently respectable,

honest, and lucrative, I have no doubt. But what is it ?’

Hopkins summed up his profession briefly thus :

‘ You want to sell stock—another man wants to buy stock—you go to a broker—he goes to a broker—both brokers go to a jobber, or dealer, which sounds nicer—your broker sells him the stock, his broker buys it of him. That’s a stock-jobber’s business in a nutshell.’

‘ But, as I am ignorant of all transactions in stock, I fail to see the pull of it.’

‘ Well, your broker sells it to me for, say, one hundred and twenty ; the other man’s broker buys it of me for, say, one hundred and twenty-one ; and that’s the way we make our living.’

‘ That is a nice business,’ said Blair, in tones of admiration ; ‘ so easy, just the thing to suit you, I should think.’

‘ Don’t listen to him,’ I cried ; ‘ go on with your tale.’

Hopkins, not the least discomposed by the interruptions, proceeded :

‘ Old Bobbett was my partner, and a

capital partner he was—sharp as a needle, and bold as a lion, and always fair in his dealings between partner and partner. The only fault I had to find with him was that he was a little too fond of speculating on his own account. I like best to let people speculate through me. It pays best in the long run, and you sleep much sounder when a rising or falling market don't make a difference of a thousand or so to you. But Bobbett couldn't keep out of it. The excitement was everything to him, and I must say he was very clever; seldom making a bad mistake. He gave all his time to it, and had the most marvellous way of picking up information before other people. I never knew where he got his tips, but when he strolled into the office of a morning and said, "Better sell or buy North British, Brighton A's," or what else it might be, I knew he had heard something, and there would be a move one way or another in the stocks he named. I tell you I used to get very frightened at first, especially when we did make losses; but at each year's end I found the balance the right side; so, at last, I came to trust

Bobbett implicitly—let him do just as he liked ; and if he told me Consols were going to drop to eighty, I think I should have believed him. Poor old Bobbett !

Hopkins paused here ; it might have been from the emotion caused by the recollection of tender commercial passages between himself and the lamented Bobbett ; but if so, his face said nothing.

Frank drew the back of his hand across his eyes, and murmured :

‘ This is all very interesting—very pathetic, but where’s the promised ghost ?’

Our stolid friend took no notice, but went on like one commencing a fresh chapter of a novel.

‘ One day my partner told me he was going to the north of England on some private business. There was very little doing on the Exchange at that time, or, I am sure, no private business would have called him away. “ Better not operate until my return,” he said, “ unless you hear from me. If I think anything worth doing, or pick up any news, I will wire.” “ All right,” I said ; “ pleasant journey to you.” And so

he went out of the office, never to return. Poor old Bobbett !

Hopkins seemed almost in tears, and we, who had never given him credit for such tender feelings, tempered our surprise with sympathy.

‘The next day but one came a telegram—from John Bobbett, Crossleigh Road Station. It contained these simple words, “Sell thirty thousand Marthas.” I was thunderstruck as I read it.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Blair ; ‘you are going beyond us again. What did he mean ? Were you slave-jobbers as well as stock-jobbers ?’

‘We call stocks by nicknames. Caledonian Deferred are “Claras,” Brighton Deferred are “Berthas,” Northern A’s “Noras,” so that Manchester and Dundees are “Marthas.”’

‘I see,’ said Blair ; ‘what ingenuity !’

‘I was thunderstruck, I say ; and as I read the telegram my first thought was, it must be a forgery ; but a secret word, known to us alone, put its authenticity beyond a doubt. And yet, in spite of my high opinion

of Bobbett's cleverness, I hesitated for some minutes. I could see no possible reason to expect a fall in the stock named. The traffic return was good, and a large dividend was naturally expected. All rails were high, and all the knowing people said must go higher. There was lots of public money for investment, and the outside public dearly loves to buy on a rising market, and yet, with all these facts before me, I am proud to say I trusted my old partner, although it was with a heavy heart I followed his instructions. I sold at the best price I could get, and just as I had placed the last five thousand, became aware of great excitement in the market. You will scarcely credit it, but telegrams came in, running so : " Terrible accident on Manchester and Dundee line. Two trains completely wrecked. Fifty persons killed and wounded." You must remember the collision. It was an awful smash up, and nearly swamped the dividend on the deferred shares for that half-year.

' As soon as the first excitement subsided, I began to think of Bobbett. I knew he

was somewhere up that way, and for the moment felt anxious about him, and then I laughed at my fears as I remembered the telegram I had received a short time before. He, at least, must be all right, or he could not have sent me that line ; but what an artful old rascal—fellow, I mean—to manage to forestall everyone in the intelligence. He must have sped to the nearest station, despatched his message, and perhaps bribed the telegraphist to keep back the official news until I had time to complete the transaction. However he managed, it was very clever, and ought to be a lot of money in our pockets, and thankful I was I had trusted him.

‘ I dare say you two in your hearts think this very wrong, but it is diamond cut diamond on the London Stock Exchange, I can tell you.’

Frank and I made polite disclaimers, and as we were growing rather interested in this iniquitous exploit of Bobbett’s, pressed Hopkins to go on without fear of wounding our susceptibilities.

‘ Of course I was very sorry for the poor

people killed, but I could not help feeling, as I went back to my office, that I had done a very good day's work. "I won't buy back," I said, "until Bobbett returns. I should think, with this transaction open, he is sure to get back to-morrow." Even as I made this resolution, a clerk put a telegram in my hand. It came from some railway official, and informed me that John Bobbett had been killed in the smash. My surprise at the first message was nothing to what I felt now. It was utterly incomprehensible—it was impossible. How could Bobbett be dead when his telegram lay before me? When he sent that he must have been alive, and, what was more, had all his wits about him. It was barely possible he could have got any one else to send off the message, and died afterwards from injuries. I was greatly puzzled and alarmed, so decided that the best thing I could do to elucidate the mystery was to go myself to the scene of the accident, and ascertain the truth.

'I started by the night mail, travelled all night, and early in the morning reached Crossleigh Road, a little station of no import-

ance. The accident had happened some miles further down the line ; and when I reached the place, I was conducted to a large barn which stood near the side of the railway ; and there, laid out on the deal boards, I saw—side by side with many a ghastly object—the corpse of poor old Bobbett, mangled and battered almost beyond recognition ! After the emotion I felt at seeing my old partner in this state had subsided, a feeling of intense fear replaced it. I saw at one glance that by no possibility could he have moved a foot after the accident, and as I stood wondering, a doctor who was near me said :

“ He was more fortunate than many, his death was instantaneous.”

‘ I obtained further particulars from the people about, and learnt that his body had been extricated from the wreck of the carriages, where it lay with about a ton of wood and iron on top of it.

‘ And yet I had his telegram, sent from Crossleigh Road, a station, as I told you before, at least five miles from the scene of the collision, and I received that telegram

nearly half an hour before any news came of the accident.'

Hopkins knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and was silent. The man's tale had been told so simply, so circumstantially, the time and places stated so distinctly, and apparently truthfully, that Frank and I for the moment were unable to suggest any explanation. Hopkins replenished his pipe with the air of one who has nothing further to say. At last I asked :

' But did you not enquire at the telegraph office ?'

' Oh yes. But I hardly like to tell you the result of my enquiries, it seems so strange. I interviewed the man who worked the machine. I did not want to get a marvellous tale spread about, so was very cautious in my questions, enquiring what messages he had sent off the day before. At first I could get nothing out of him, but I noticed, when I asked him whether he could remember any strange occurrence just before the accident, he seemed troubled, and hesitated a little ; so I pressed him further, and at last got this statement from him.

Some time, about half an hour he thinks, before he heard of the accident down the line, he was standing in the office with his back to the fire, engaged in cracking nuts, eating apples, or some other device that clerks with plenty of leisure employ to while away the time, when he felt a breath of cold air as if some one had entered and left the outer door ajar. He turned round to remonstrate with the careless intruder, and, to his surprise, saw the door was shut. As he glanced round the room he heard the familiar click, click, click, and he was quite prepared to swear he saw the handle of the instrument working rapidly on its own account, and evidently sending off a message somewhere. He was so taken aback, and, indeed, frightened, that for some moments he could not move, and when at last he recovered himself sufficiently to spring forward, the movement of the handle had ceased, and the message, whatever it was, speeding to its destination. He was sure, from the short time it took in sending, the message was one of very few words, and I need not say that, as telegraph clerks are unaccustomed to

seeing their instruments worked by invisible agency, he was very much puzzled, but decided not to report the occurrence for fear his superiors should think he had been drinking. I gave him a couple of sovereigns, and begged him to say nothing about it. Afterwards I enquired at the other end, and found the message had been forwarded in an ordinary way. So that in spite of my disbelief in anything supernatural I could only come to one conclusion.'

'It is very strange,' said Frank. 'So you think——'

'I think that poor old Bobbett's ghost flew at once to the telegraph-office and managed to send off that important message to his old partner and friend. Bobbett was a very clever man, and no doubt his ghost was cleverer than other people's ghost's.'

'So that in the general confusion it managed to evade pursuit for a few moments?'

Hopkins made no reply.

'But,' I asked, 'have you any reason for thinking that ghosts in general, or Bobbett's

ghost in particular, are endued with a knowledge of the Morse alphabet ?’

‘I have told you before,’ said Hopkins with crushing solemnity, ‘that Bobbett was a clever man, and knew most things.’

‘Well, what about the what-d’ye-call-ems—the young women, the Marthas?’ asked Frank.

‘I waited some days before I closed the account, hoping that Bobbett might send me instructions about them somehow, but as I heard nothing from him, I bought them back at ten per cent. less.’

‘That I suppose means a satisfactory conclusion, and you netted something?’

‘Three thousand pounds. It ought to have been more had I dared to wait; for they fell fifteen before they stopped. Perhaps,’ added Hopkins thoughtfully and regretfully, ‘had I waited till then, Bobbett would have sent me a message to close.’

He said this in such serious good faith, that we stared at one another. When we recovered from our astonishment, I asked :

‘That profit, of course, went into the partnership account?’

‘Of course it did, sir,’ replied Hopkins almost angrily. ‘After deducting my travelling expenses I passed his share to his credit.’

‘And I hope,’ said Frank, with a solemn face, ‘you paid the company the shilling for the telegraphic message which Mr. Bobbett sent without their permission.’

Hopkins rose with a manner almost dignified.

‘Mr. Blair,’ he said, ‘this is the one subject I never jest upon. I have told you, in the simplest language, a strange, but a true tale, and will now wish you good-night.’

So saying he went.

Frank, rather huffed at his last words, only shook hands with our departing guest, but I conducted him downstairs and saw him out. As I closed the door I heard a tremendous grunt; indeed so loud was it I thought it must be a summons for re-admittance. I opened the door again, and, to my surprise, saw Hopkins leaning against the railings, with every muscle of his broad back in motion. I was quite alarmed, and said hastily :

‘Are you ill, old fellow?’

The quivering motion ceased, and Hopkins turned round and looked up at me, and his great face, under the lamplight, was empty of expression as ever.

‘No; only the recollection of those things of which I told you always upsets me. Good-night. Poor old Bobbett!’

‘Strange tale, Frank,’ I said, when having closed the door on Hopkins’s departing sigh, we settled down once more.

‘Very. Had anyone else but Hopkins told it, I shouldn’t have believed a word of it; but he could no more invent it than he could paint my Alexander and Thais.’

‘How do you account for it?’

‘Can’t account for it. The only explanation I can see is, that Bobbett, who must have been no end of a rascal, laid some plan for wrecking the trains, and arranged to have the telegram sent off previously. But then he was in the train, and was smashed up himself, so that won’t do.’

‘I have seen it asserted,’ I said, ‘in a book on spiritual influences, that a person dying, and thinking of someone at a dis-

tance, had been able to make a sort of resemblance of himself appear to that someone. Bobbett's thoughts, directly the smash came, may have turned to his own passion—speculating, and acted somewhat in the same way.'

'Nonsense !' said Frank ; ' that won't hold water. I can't account for it.'

'Neither can I.'

And we never did. Hopkins declined to talk any more upon the subject, which he said was a painful one to him, so we soon ceased to think about it.

And yet there is one thing that puzzles me. Some years afterwards I spoke about Hopkins and his peculiarities, or rather lack of peculiarities, to a mutual friend, when suddenly remembering his tale, I said :

'By-the-bye, did you know his late partner Bobbett ?'

'Oh yes ; very well—sharp man he was too !'

'Killed in a railway accident, I believe ?'

'No ; he died in his bed like other people, and left a lot of money behind him.'

Now this piece of information, coupled

with the recollection of Hopkins as I saw him, leaning against the railings outside the front-door, and quivering with strange emotion, roused a feeling of uneasiness in my mind, and sometimes now, in spite of his unmeaning features and commonplace demeanour, I ask myself, in confidence : ‘ Are we wrong after all, and does Hopkins possess imagination ? ’

THE END.

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